

5 Strategic Tips for First-Year Administrators

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Once a fourth-grade teacher, I recently began my work as an elementary assistant principal in another district. Based on my research and what I have experienced so far, I'd like to offer five ways for a rookie administrator to successfully navigate his or her new position.

1. Establishing Relationships

Relationships come before everything. Like anyone else, teachers do not want to listen to someone who doesn't genuinely care about them. Get to know everyone on a personal level. Ask them how their day is going, pry into their personal lives a bit, and make sure to attend staff outings. As the students enter school in the morning, do your best to pop your head into every classroom just to be present and touch base with your teachers and students. As you leave school for the day, stop by a few classrooms and make small talk. When communicating with teachers, it's important that your conversation doesn't just focus on the job itself. If you truly want what is best for your co-workers and students, none of these interactions will actually feel like work. However, investing in these relationships will play huge dividends when you're ready to promote change.

2. Getting Into Classrooms

Just as teachers should never forget what it's like to be a student, administrators should never forget what it's like to be a teacher. Spend a great deal of time in classrooms, being as non-evaluative as you can. Teachers can easily feel threatened when an administrator sits behind a computer (supposedly taking notes that pick apart each and every aspect of a lesson), so travel around with as little equipment as possible. Personally, I like to record the date whenever I spend more than ten minutes in a classroom, which helps in ensuring that my time is distributed evenly among all the teachers. Also, if a teacher asks what you are doing, be transparent. For instance:

- I'm looking for examples of exemplary instruction so that we can take advantage of our expertise during teacher-led professional development.

- How can I help in moving us forward if I don't see first-hand what our strengths and needs are?

3. Understanding Others

Do less talking and more listening, but don't stop there. When conversing with others, make a conscious effort to avoid waiting to talk and trying to prove yourself. I believe that most teachers are more concerned with the new administrator validating their work, as opposed to wanting to be awed by that administrator's expertise. So take the time to sincerely understand where teachers are coming from. For example, if the majority of teachers possess a negative attitude toward something, don't ignore it. Perception is reality, and if most teachers feel a certain way, act (or react) appropriately, instead of telling them "Too bad" or convincing yourself that "they deserve what's happening to them." Also, when appropriate, do what you can to make teachers' ideas a reality. These actions can be empowering as they send the message that thoughts and opinions can make a difference.

4. Flattening the Hierarchy

Approach your job with the notion that everyone has something to contribute, because a valuable idea can come from absolutely anyone. Don't take it personally if anyone challenges you on some level. In other words, make sure to separate ideas and opinions from the individuals who are delivering them. Leverage your new title to empower others to speak up and have a voice. One person's idea is no better than another's simply because he or she has a "higher-up" job title, and certain responsibilities should not belong entirely to specific workers just because they happen to be in a department that has traditionally taken care of such tasks. Ultimately, what matters is working collaboratively to do what's best for the children, not trying to market yourself as the owner of all things great in your school or district. As a fourth-grade teacher, I once had the pleasure of working with a phenomenal assistant superintendent. Whenever we met, a stranger could walk into the room and, based on our interaction, wouldn't know who was the teacher and who was the administrator. That is special!

5. Social Media

In today's connected world, all educators should be actively looking for ideas and resources from outside their district. These findings can then be brought in-house to enhance what is already taking place. Furthermore, this research helps educators become critical consumers and not just passive receivers of what others tell us to do. As a new administrator, make a point of connecting with your teachers on Facebook, as this is most likely where they already are. Then, post to your wall articles and resources that could be of benefit. This approach can be a non-intrusive way to professionally develop your teachers without constantly flooding their inboxes with "must read" editorials (although the occasional article sent via email isn't such a bad thing). To streamline the Facebook process, consider starting a Facebook group that includes members of your staff. If you'd like to share your own thoughts, start a blog and disseminate your posts through Facebook or possibly via email. Other teachers might become inspired and start blogs of their own, or have their students start blogging. Yes, there is always the idea of getting your teachers up and running with Twitter (and Google+, LinkedIn, RSS feeds, digital newspapers, etc.), but that's another post all on its own.

Reviewing the five points that I've listed, these actions could easily apply to all administrators and not just those who are new to the position. As the years go by and we become more and more comfortable in what we do, it's important to not lose sight of what got us there in the first place.

What tips do you have for first-year administrators?