

CHAPTER ONE

Why Is It So Chilly in the Teachers' Lounge?

We know the importance of administrators. We know that it is important for successful schools—whether it is in academic success or in creating healthy school cultures and collaborations with communities—to have an instructional leader guiding the educational process. There is more to do than can ever possibly be done.

Whatever path someone takes to become an administrator—whether it is through the teaching ranks or from outside of education, whether someone has had years of teaching experience or none—there is a new adventure waiting. Administration is a rare opportunity to marry leadership and followership, creativity and redundancy, and scholar and manager.

Different states have different rules about requirements for administrative licensure. Some states require teaching experience, and others do not. Some require a certain number of years of teaching, and others do not. Whatever path a person chooses, whatever college major a person has, and whatever level of experience, whether elementary or secondary, the position of administrator offers some unique changes for the individual in self-identity and socioemotional discoveries.

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Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), in their book *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, stated, “Strong principals [administrators and teacher leaders] are crucial to the creation of learning communities, but the image of how a strong principal operates needs to be reconsidered” (p. 183). Most administrators would probably aspire to be the “Level 5” leader as described by Jim Collins (2001) in his book *Good to Great*. A Level 5 leader is a paradoxical mix that is “modest and willful, humble and fearless” (p. 22). The leader has a “compelling modesty” (p. 27) and creates an organization that cultivates that type of leadership in others (p. 39).

DuFour and Eaker (1998, pp. 184–188) describe this leader has someone who

Leads through shared vision and values rather than through rules and procedures

Involves faculty members in the school’s decision-making processes and empowers individuals to act

Provides staff with the information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions

However, schools are hierarchical and bureaucratic. The instructional leader has to marry the instructional role with the necessary pieces of manager and supervisor to keep an organization running smoothly. It is an artistic endeavor to balance the roles.

TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

The bureaucratic, hierarchical structure of schools has created a series of subgroups that compete for scarce resources, attention, and power. Memberships within subgroups create subcultures with peculiar personal and professional realities. Although being part of a group creates a sense of belonging, it paradoxically creates a “we/they” culture among the groups within the organization.

One of the most powerful struggles within a school is the we/they thinking between teachers and administrators. Contentious struggles between union leaders and administration accent this separation. If union negotiations do not go well, the division is widened.

Teachers perpetuate the separation by having lounge and hallway conversations about administrators. "If only the principal. . . . If only the superintendent. . . ." Common, almost mantra-like criticisms are that principals are distanced from students, do not follow through on discipline, and are out of the building too much.

Administrators perpetuate the divide by having similar conversations, generalizing about "all" teachers, withholding information from teachers, or being removed from the daily work of classrooms.

There are two major reasons that the separation remains despite collaborative efforts. First, few teachers have been administrators and, therefore, cannot understand that role. Administrators have a more global viewpoint than do classroom teachers. Administrators must create a system where all parts interact and run smoothly, from transportation to food service, to special education to regular instruction. They are middle managers who must be a liaison between parents and community, teachers and parents, and building and superintendent.

However, the main concern for teachers is student achievement. Their world is more centered on classroom- and building-level concerns. Because they have never been an administrator, they, understandably, do not grasp the complexities of the administrative role. Administrators are often the intermediary between teachers and parents, as well as teachers and community, much more than teachers realize. Ironically, the more that an effective administrator keeps interference away from the classroom, the less likely it is that a teacher knows this is occurring.

Second, administrators remain as supervisors and evaluators of teachers. No matter how much collaboration is established within a school, anytime there is a power differential, there will be certain boundaries that cannot be crossed. It is not likely that someone can be a close personal friend with a subordinate. In fact, if a relationship level changes (e.g., by two people marrying), the supervisory responsibilities in a healthy organization are given to someone else. For example, if a principal marries a staff member, the evaluative responsibilities are given to the assistant principal.

As a teacher, one is part of the largest subgroup in the educational organization. As an administrator, one is part of the smallest and most scrutinized subgroups. However, administrators tend to have more power than other groups.

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THE REALIZATION PROCESS

When someone leaves a subgroup, such as the group of teachers, and becomes part of management, such as educational administration, there must also be a change in the socioemotional realities and self-perception. For the new identity to be adopted successfully, one must experience stages of change and develop coping skills.

The first few weeks of the new job are exciting and unsettling. Because a person has had administrative classes, has earned a degree or certificate, and has been part of school systems, it is assumed that the person knows how to be an administrator. However, that is not entirely true. It is also assumed that head principals have had assistant experience to learn the job. That, too, is not always true. In my research, 35% of the women in the study became head principals directly out of the classroom, without benefit of interning, mentoring, or assistant principal experiences.

If someone begins an administrative career as an assistant principal, the head principal is responsible for offering guidance and direction. Unfortunately, the head principal is the one who has the least amount of time to do that. What usually happens is that the head principal offers overall structure and assumes that the assistant will be self-directed and motivated to “discover” the realities of the job. Once again, the structure of education is such that we do not get the opportunity to benefit fully from others’ experiences. We do not have extended internships like the medical profession, where experienced doctors conduct “rounds” to question and teach. In education, we are too often on our own. As assistants, we are lucky to have conversations with the head principal “on the fly,” in passing in the halls, or in short team meetings once a week. This is not enough.

Some administrators rise through the ranks from within their own organization, and others come from another district. Some even come from outside of education. Although some people make the transition with relative ease, most who leave teaching to become administrators describe a separation process from their former identity. They realize that their former teacher-friends are reserved around them. One woman described the isolation as follows: “There is no one to trust. No one at my level—I can’t be friendly with staff” (Sigford, 1995, p. 132). Such words reflect the loneliness

and painfulness of being “at the top” where there are few peers from whom to draw support.

Walking into the staff lounge as an administrator is a different experience from walking in as a teacher. The atmosphere feels chilly. Conversations stop or suddenly take a different direction. As one woman described it, “The definition [of you] changes as you get up in the organization. I don’t sit and have coffee in the lounge anymore” (Sigford, 1995, p. 130). There is not the casual interaction in the hallways that there once was. Conversation in the office rarely crosses professional boundaries. Administrators and teachers may discuss family and personal interests, but it occurs on a different level. Teachers are more hesitant in their relationships with administrators because there is a power differential. A principal said, “I know I have people who care about me a lot, including my assistant principals and teachers, but I’m still the boss. There is a limit as to how close you can get” (Sigford, 1995, p. 130).

It is appropriate that there is a type of distance between administrators and teachers. It is difficult enough to supervise adults, but it is extremely difficult to supervise or discipline friends. Administrators must maintain care and concern for their staff but also must maintain a professional distance. One administrator described that she interacts frequently with her middle school staff. She goes to plays with them once a year as a faculty outing, and she goes to Friday after-school sessions. But she goes early and leaves early. Just as in healthy families, it is important for there to be respectful boundaries and clarity aligned with positions.

Even with the excitement and promise of a new position, with the change in role and self-identity, there is rightfully a sense of loss. People assume that moving up the ladder and taking a new position will be a joyful occasion, but they are surprised by and unprepared for the sadness and loneliness that are also there.

STAGES OF CHANGE FOR THE PERSONAL GROWTH PROCESS

In any major change, professional or personal, there is a growth process that one must go through to redefine the self. This change process is reminiscent of the grief process as described by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) in her book, *On Death and Dying*.

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Kubler-Ross's work with terminally ill patients and with families who lost their loved ones led her to describe five stages of grief and loss. Each stage has a purpose and has lessons that must be learned. It is important to realize that the stages apply to a change, no matter if the change is perceived as positive or negative, because with any major change there is a loss, as well as a gain. Too often, people are not prepared for that paradox. For example, if a person moves to a new city, that is a good thing, but it also means leaving the familiar behind—the friends, restaurants, and familiar patterns. If a person starts a new job, there are new adventures ahead, but there is the loss of leaving known expectations, routines, and people behind. This is a type of loss.

Some people have gone through major life events but have not perceived this sense of loss. Change and loss affect people differently. Some are more attuned, whereas some could experience the loss of both parents but not experience these stages. As a therapist, Alla Bozarth-Campbell (1982), in her book *Life Is Goodbye, Life Is Hello*, clarified that

what to one person may be a grievous loss may amount to mere inconvenience for another. The key is in the meaning which a person invests in what has been given up or taken away by fate, circumstances, or will. . . . The more of myself I have invested, given over, or entrusted outside of myself . . . in being cut off . . . from that part of me that the other represented . . . I have lost a part of my own self. (p. 25)

She further states that it is important “to discover the nature of the losses and their meanings and the impact of the feelings within ourselves, and then to find appropriate ways of responding. There are no short cuts” (p. 16).

Denial

Kubler-Ross (1969) calls this first stage *denial* because the person involved may deny the significance of the change. In a professional change, the first stage, denial, lasts about three to six months. If the change is a promotion, this first stage may feel like euphoria. If the change is a lateral move or demotion, the person in this stage may feel numb. When one leaves teaching to become an administrator, this denial stage is manifested in some startling “ahas.” One is that the title *administrator* or *principal* has

more credibility and authority in the eyes of students, staff, and parents. The words of an administrator are seen as more powerful than the words of a teacher.

Another “aha” is that the newness of the position prevents active processing in dealing with the reality of the loss. The new tasks, new people, and even a new office are exciting and different. This excitement masks the loss of what is no longer available, such as the easy camaraderie and support among teachers, a larger number of support persons, and the feeling of belonging to a large group identified with being a teacher.

The loss of identity and support is particularly keen for those nontraditionals in the field, such as women and persons of color. There are few peers to seek out. As one woman said, “Now I’m in a glass bowl. People watch carefully. They might misinterpret. There are not a lot of people to talk to” (Sigford, 1995, p. 130).

Part of the denial is that people have difficulty in changing their identity from teacher to administrator. They still think of themselves as teachers, denying that they are any different from when they were teachers. After all, they have been in a classroom and understand what that is like.

However, it only takes the first unpopular decision for the shift in self-identity. The administrator quickly becomes the “they” in the we/they culture of teacher and administration. For the sake of the administrator, the quicker one changes the mind-set to become an administrator, the quicker one can become successful in the role. One cannot maintain a dual identity because too many conflicts arise.

In one case, a new administrator clung to the identity that she was a teacher. For example, she forced the incorporation of using a reading series that she had used as a classroom teacher. She constantly referred to her teaching experiences. However, the teachers in her building did not expect her to act as a teacher; they wanted her to be an administrator. She struggled for two years but was never able to change her identity within that building. She left to become a principal in another district, was able to start over, and did not make that mistake. She currently is doing well but always describes herself as administrator.

The identity switch is forced rapidly after the first unpopular decision; conversations suddenly change when the administrator walks by in the hall. Fewer people drop by the office just to chat. People start making appointments to share their opinion—“just

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so that you know.” Staff members go out on Friday after school and invite the administrator occasionally, but the conversations are different because the administrator cannot be entirely relaxed and candid in conversations. There is an emotional distance that was not there previously. The reality of the position begins to set in.

Anger

Anger, the second stage, surfaces when teachers and administrators have differing opinions. It is startling for a new administrator the first time there is a difference of opinion with teachers. As an administrator, one expects to have differing opinions with parents and students, but it is startling to realize the number of times it happens with teachers. Because teachers do not have the same vantage point as administrators, they assume that everyone works as hard as they do and follows policy and procedures. They do not realize how many times an administrator has to hold teachers accountable.

Dealing with staff issues is one of the most difficult parts of being an administrator. As a former teacher, an administrator expects people to do their jobs and to do them well. It is disheartening, and part of the grief, when that does not occur. This disillusionment causes frustration and anger.

It is particularly irksome that staff do not have an inkling of the turmoil of administration. It is easy for teachers to sit in the lounge and criticize, but administrators cannot share complete explanations because of professional boundaries and data privacy. An administrator sometimes thinks, “If only they knew. . . .”

One way to deal with the anger is to blame others. But in healthy organizations, “Level 5” leaders (Collins, 2001) use a window and mirror approach. When things go well, the leader looks out the window to attribute success to the staff. When things do not go well, the leader looks into the mirror to accept responsibility (pp. 33–35).

Schools are complex systems with complex interactions. It is important at this point to understand that feelings of anger and frustration are a normal *evolution* from teacher to administrator and not a *result*. If the administrator is to be successful, the anger will dissipate, as the reflective administrator is able to monitor the process of change.

Bargaining

When the rosy feeling of the new job is over and the anger has surfaced, it is time to progress to the third stage of *bargaining*. One begins to identify with the position of administration and crosses the divide from the personal journey to the professional one. The person begins to leave the old role behind.

Some principals begin practicing things they have studied during this time. For example, one principal said she would improve her listening. She wanted to help "key leaders from the building . . . work hard at having people confront issues, not talk behind people's backs" (Sigford, 1995, p. 122).

Another principal used a "lot of brainstorming and sharing. It sometimes gets into shouting and arguing with each other but we work it out." One principal described it as "various groups . . . all have parts of a puzzle to look at. I try to get various groups to have ownership but not be bogged down" (Sigford, 1995, p. 122).

Bargaining is an unconscious part of the self-talk that occurs during this stage. "If I try this, people will view me as a successful administrator." "Administration has to do. . . ." The administrator begins to identify more with conversations from the central office than those in the teachers' lounge. The journey toward the professional administrator has begun. "There is more to be seen than can be seen."

Depression

The fourth stage, *depression*, may be disguised as frustration, exhaustion, and stress. It can be characterized by self-doubt. It is at this point that some administrators think about leaving to return to teaching, to move to a new district, or to pursue a career in other areas, such as curriculum, college teaching, or a superintendency. The faulty assumption is that any of those positions would be less stressful. Despite the difficulties and complexities of administration, few people return to teaching. Because administration has a more global perspective of education and different opportunities to make a difference, and teaching is so proscribed, it is difficult to return to the classroom.

Some people leave during this stage because the job is hard; it does not feel good. Some people want to feel the euphoria of the newness of Stage 1 all over again. They become "change junkies" because of that initial "high." Unfortunately, depression is the

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next stage after bargaining, no matter what the change or what job a person has. If one gets a new job and a new “high,” the next stage will come eventually.

Depression is common, especially toward the end of the second year. The honeymoon is over, bargaining did not work entirely, and the job is difficult. It is important to realize that this stage is necessary and unavoidable. There is personal work to be done within this stage to achieve the more peaceful place of success. For some people, this stage is short-lived and barely recognizable, but it does occur.

Acceptance

The final stage, *acceptance*, becomes apparent when one realizes a feeling of ownership and pride as an administrator. It often takes from three to five years to achieve this. There is a feeling of satisfaction in making a difference in the lives of students and staff. There is awareness that one has been able to make a change. Disagreements with staff, parents, and students no longer feel personal. It is as though there is a Plexiglas shield around the body so that one can see and deal with issues, but the issues cannot cause personal damage. Certainly, there will always be discouraging days, but the problems do not seem unsolvable. Plus, some of the problems are repeats, and the administrator has built up a databank of resolutions. “Oh, I’ve done this before. I can handle this.” It is like making the master schedule for the second time. The first time feels fragmented, complex, and intimidating. The second time is easier, and by the third time, one is a pro and can even preempt some of the problems. It is like making classroom assignments for elementary classrooms to make sure that the classes are balanced male/female, gifted/not gifted, special ed/regular ed. It gets easier each time.

The job is difficult. Not everyone will agree with what an administrator does all the time. In fact, if no one disagrees, a person wonders if there is something wrong. Plus, it seems that an administrator will hear the “naysayers” first, and the positive voices will always come later.

It is a milestone of acceptance when an administrator can walk into the teachers’ lounge and describe the atmosphere as “removed,” not chilly. Administrators are indeed removed from the role of teachers. That is part of the acceptance of the position.

GETTING STUCK

Each stage of change has a purpose and a lesson that must be learned before the process can be completed. Sometimes, people get stuck in a stage. They create situations in which they repeat a stage over and over, rather than dealing with issues so they can move on.

Some people like the euphoria of the first stage. For example, when a person accepts a new job, there is exhilaration. When some of the struggles of the new job begin to set in, however, some people may actually change jobs rather than feel the pain and work through the process. By avoiding the pain, they end up re-creating the same situation over and over. They move from job to job or district to district to feel the excitement, rather than staying long enough to feel the not-so-positive feelings.

Others recreate job situations where they are stuck in anger. They are angry about how hard they work in comparison to other people. When their job starts going better, they will create a situation so they can feel angry once more. They are recognizable by their language because they are always blaming someone else when the job becomes overly stressful—teachers, superintendents, parents, school boards, students. They seem to hate their job.

Physically, anger is like love, in that it produces endorphins in the body. Some people are just as addicted to the endorphins of anger as others are addicted to the “high” produced by exercise and laughter. They become “anger junkies.”

Some people get stuck in the third stage, bargaining. They never get to the point of self-assurance and identity as an administrator. They never give up the role of teacher entirely. They are not able to live with the unpopularity of decisions and constantly try to appease all factions, an impossible task. They have difficulty defining the bottom line. They believe to a fault that if they work harder and smarter, all will be well.

Others are stuck in depression. They feel that the world, their friends, their training, and even life in general, have failed them. They wallow in self-pity and blame everyone else for their discomfort. If something starts going well, they will put a negative slant to it. Nothing will ever be good enough. The world is a cup half empty.

The final stage, acceptance, is a pleasant place to be stuck. It takes time to achieve this level. This is not to say that there are not

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days of denial, anger, bargaining, or depression, but, overall, the administrator has achieved an understanding of the position, the self, and the balance and interaction between the two. In Collins's (2001) terms, is this a Level 5 leader?

The Work of Each Stage

Each stage has tasks that must be accomplished successfully before moving forward. The work of the first stage, *denial*, is to help separation and redefinition. The work of this time is to eliminate those things that are no longer necessary. A person experiences *letting go*. This stage helps by pruning the unnecessary remnants of the past to help define what is necessary to carry forward into the new.

Hanging onto the label *teacher* is one example of denial. Administrators are still teachers but in a very different sense. The instruction is more likely to be procedural or process learning, particularly because administrators are working with adult learners who have very different needs from those of children.

Administrators are also more likely to teach one-on-one or in small groups, as opposed to classroom instruction. Teacher evaluations are an example. Conferencing with a teacher to improve instruction is an administrator's type of teaching. Although it is vastly different from standing in front of a classroom of 25 six-year-olds, it is equally powerful. It is more removed from students but may have more of an impact because as an administrator influences teachers, the teachers, in turn, influence hundreds of students. Although administrators continue to instruct, their role is to be an administrator. It is important to accept that.

The work of the second stage, *anger*, is to facilitate the separation from the former position to the present one. Unless there is a good reason to let go, people have a tendency to cling to old ideas and identities. Leaving something behind is painful, and it can make someone sad or angry. For some people, it feels stronger to leave angry rather than to experience the pain of sadness. However, it is important to realize that anger is a cover-up emotion because it masks the pain of fear and sadness.

An example of the purpose of anger is illustrated by a story that I have told seniors in high school when they become

depressed and angry in the spring of their senior year. The senior year has been publicized as wonderful and exciting, and many students are unprepared for the roller coaster of feelings that occur during that time. In reality, the senior year is difficult because of its many endings. The last basketball game. The last pep fest. The last dance. The pain is particularly prevalent around prom time because students might stay with their boyfriend or girlfriend through prom and break up immediately after. There are so many "lasts" during the year. What students do not know, because they have not lived long enough, is that there are many "firsts" waiting just around the corner.

Students get angry with their friends and significant others because it feels stronger and less vulnerable than feeling sad. They do not want to walk around crying all year because being sad feels helpless and weak. Therefore, students use anger to help them make separations and say goodbye.

Adults use the same mechanisms when they make major life changes. For example, few divorces end happily. Anger can help a person move forward as long as it helps separation. But it can be destructive if someone enjoys the feeling and refuses to leave it behind.

The task of the third stage, *bargaining*, is to begin fusing denial and anger to refocus on the future. The work of the first two stages is to say goodbye to the past. Bargaining is the bridge to the work of the future that brings together what was learned in the past to help shape the future. It is this fusion that helps create the new self-identity.

The fourth stage, *depression*, is necessary for the final letting go. If one cannot perform that final release, it is at this stage that a person will leave to take a new position. This stage often occurs around the end of the second year of administration. Working through the stages of grief and change are like experiencing a roller coaster ride. In depression, the roller coaster has taken a downturn again, almost like returning to the earlier stage of anger; that does not feel good. This is the final and crucial stage before one can move to a new socioemotional reality.

The final upturn of the ride comes with *acceptance*, occurring around the third to fourth year in the position. It takes that long for ideas to gel, for programs that were set in motion to demonstrate results, and for a person to change self-perception. Acceptance feels good.

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We never learn about the emotional stages of change in graduate school. Professors tend to ignore discussing the socio-emotional parts of the job because such discussions feel “soft.” By the very nature of schools, we as administrators do not talk about such things with our peers because we are so isolated. We have little opportunity to be reflective as we deal with the daily task of survival. It is through the recognition and acceptance of the work of these stages, however, that helps administrators achieve successful socialization in their roles as administrators.

No one said change would be easy. The roller coaster effect is painful, but after every downturn, there is an upturn that ends, it is hoped, on a plateau. The height of the hills and valleys of the roller coaster ride diminishes with each succeeding stage. The important part of the process is to recognize the work that must be done. There are no shortcuts. But there are many rewards.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO DEAL WITH THE CHANGE PROCESS

1. To deal with change successfully, one must recognize that there are stages. Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) quotes the Buddha, who said, “When something has come to be, we have to acknowledge its presence and look deeply into its nature” (p. 31). Naming and describing the stages makes them less frightening. There will be backsliding within the stages, but the return to the more advanced stage will be shorter if the work inherent to the stage has been accomplished.

2. Learn to forgive if there is a return to a previous stage. There may be a return to anger or denial, but that is normal. Change is not a linear process. Just as in dieting, if there is a slip, do not give up. Just start again tomorrow.

3. Experience the stages; do not withdraw from them. Avoiding them means that they will appear in a different fashion and will have to be dealt with anyway. People have a tendency to avoid that which is painful, which is only a short-term solution for a long-term problem. Like the seniors in high school, one must experience all the endings so that one can rejoice in the new beginnings.

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4. Look forward to the next stage. If one looks backward continually, one is likely to miss the scenery ahead.

5. Practice proactivity. Record this journey in some way, perhaps in a journal. Some may want to draw their journal. Others may keep an e-log. Others will write in a traditional fashion. It is helpful to have some record because it is amazing to read what has happened in a year. As one lives day to day, it is hard to see the pieces of the whole. Reading what happened a year ago is always astonishing because of the perspective it offers.

6. Find someone at a similar professional stage. Structure time together to discuss experiences. Free time is a luxury, but being able to find support is crucial. Join a principals' organization. Join Phi Delta Kappa. Start a study group within your district.

7. Do something outside of education. It is too easy to become single-minded. Find several things that transport mind and body away from education. Read "garbage" novels. Run. See plays. Bike. Walk in the woods. Golf. Fish. Watch the crackling fire in the fireplace. We give this good advice to our staff but do not always follow our own good suggestion. It is important for educational leaders to model this behavior.

8. Recognize that change is certain; growth is optional. Life will change and people will change. One can either be an active participant in the process, or one can be controlled by it.

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Box 1.1 Journal

1. When did I experience the stages of change?
2. Where am I in my career?
3. What issues do I need to work on before I can move forward?
4. How can I use this information in my work with my staff?
5. What are "aha's" for me in this chapter?