

Advice for Superintendents: A Consultant's Perspective

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As a former teacher in an urban school district (12 years) and as a consultant who has worked closely with more than 20 superintendents, I have learned a few things about the complex role of the superintendent. I have great respect for the challenging, even overwhelming job of a superintendent.

My motivation for writing this article was a conversation I recently had with a superintendent who is struggling with his leadership role in a new school district. He has been a superintendent before, and is hard working, smart and principled. He found that many of the skills and qualities that he brings to the table, just didn't seem to be enough. We reflected on his past and current practice and discovered two things that he needs to focus on in the next year of his superintendency. He is committed to pay attention to building his senior team as well as creating "relational capital" throughout the school district.



He realized that he had hit the road running when he first transitioned into his new leadership role and did not take the time to assess his cabinet, build cohesion and supervise effectively. He assumed that they were all talented and motivated and were doing their jobs. Besides, there were many problems to solve and it seemed like there was little time available for the "soft" stuff.

Secondly, he understood that he needed to make authentic, personal connections with internal stakeholders before he started changing things. His exciting and new ideas all looked good on paper, but he needed the commitment of others to help implement them. Although he made the customary round of visits to key officials and community members when he first came on board, he forgot to meet and listen carefully to individual staff, teachers, students and parents. This lack of real connection was hurting any hope for implementation.

Failure and success all leave clues, this article is a reflection of a twenty year journey with superintendents and an attempt to share some notions that might be helpful.

1. Invest in your senior team:

For superintendents to be successful, they need the help and support of their cabinet. Effective senior teams can leverage a superintendent's efforts in dramatic ways. When a talented and dedicated team at the top is working together to accomplish a shared vision and mission for their district, great things can happen. When the senior team is dysfunctional, it negatively impacts the entire district, decisions take forever, the rumor mill is in high gear and issues are quickly polarized. It is not a pretty thing to see.

The superintendent is the only one who can truly build a sense of team with their cabinet. This takes skill, attention, time and

patience. Unfortunately, too few are willing to dedicate themselves to this endeavor.

There are several reasons for this: some don't have the relational skills necessary for this challenging task or the stomach for it; others don't see the need for creating a real sense of team with the cabinet because they have never been a part of a high-functioning team and still others are so externally orientated with commitments elsewhere, (e.g. community meetings, state associations, foundations) they don't have the time to invest in building their cabinet and hope that somehow everything will be okay while they are gone. Often there is a mythology that exists where superintendents believe that if they hire really smart, talented people and just let them do their jobs, somehow, all will be well. It rarely works this way.

Too many superintendents hold perfunctory cabinet meetings once or twice a month to review operational progress and "check in" with people. Strategy or complex issues are never addressed. These are lost opportunities to develop a coherent perspective of the district and are mostly a waste of time. Other superintendents manage their cabinets by periodically meeting one-on-one with them to review their individual portfolios and problem solve. Several problems emerge from this approach:

- The cabinet members never develop a systemic picture of the school district and see issues from only their narrow silos (e.g. financial, technology, curriculum). They do not get the opportunity to see how their actions and decisions impact the entire district. This limits both the quality of the decisions they make and the potential synergies that could be realized.
- The cabinet never develops a real sense of community and connection with each other. If a cabinet member is struggling and, you can bet at any given time, someone is, the other team members don't know about it. Therefore, they cannot help. When a superintendent builds a sense of team with their cabinet, ownership for the success of the district becomes the group's common goal. They actively work to help each other because they are committed to each other's success.
- The superintendent's silo approach to the cabinet creates a similar one for the institution. District employees feel responsible for only their division or school and not the whole institution. Collaboration across boundaries becomes difficult, if not impossible. An integrated and visible senior team powerfully communicates district unity and cooperation. A superintendent's cabinet that is seen as well-functioning fosters a collaborative culture throughout the school district. Superintendents should understand that everyone in the district knows if the senior team is well-functioning or not. Ultimately, there are very few secrets in a district.

Lastly, I witnessed an "isolated" cabinet deal with a serious incident, not a crisis, in one of their schools. The superintendent quickly called everyone together to deal with the issue. It was appalling to see a group of very bright individuals try and deal with an unfamiliar situation. They didn't know how to work together collaboratively had no established protocols in place and couldn't make effective decisions as a team. The superintendent looked overwhelmed and, for a while, it seemed like no one was in charge.

The lesson learned is: don't expect a cabinet to act like a competent team in a difficult situation when they have not experienced working together beforehand. Superintendents, build your senior team.

2. Encourage openness & honesty:

A superintendent must be proactive in creating a climate of openness and candor. It will not happen by itself. I have found

that not enough people tell the superintendent what they are actually thinking and often feel uncomfortable challenging the superintendent's ideas. By the way, superintendents know this. One new superintendent I worked with remarked, *"I am amazed that I get very little constructive feedback or resistance to my ideas. It is as if becoming the superintendent made me brilliant over night"*.

I fully realize that many teachers and parents have no problem challenging a superintendent's ideas and more than a few relish the opportunity. But, overall, I have found that the superintendent can be a daunting person to constructively confront or challenge.

Although the reasons for this could easily fill a book, I found one, pervasive theme through my work and interactions with superintendents. Often, followers see "the" superintendent as representing the school districts history, culture, power and traditions. In short, they are a powerful representation of the entire institution. Somehow, they feel by challenging the superintendent they are being disrespectful to the school district they care deeply about.

Whatever the reason, I have seen this dynamic played out over and over again. To deal with this psychological barrier, the superintendent must honestly encourage the openness and honesty of others. They need to actively solicit feedback about their ideas and listen carefully to the responses of others. When a superintendent encourages this kind of honesty, people will look very carefully at their responses and reactions so it must be authentic; it can't be faked. This openness is not a one shot deal and must be a commitment over time. Once followers believe that the superintendent is truly interested in their ideas, they will share their best thinking with them and provide needed feedback.

With district-wide issues, superintendents can write an informal memo to share their beginning thinking with district stakeholders and create a process for receiving anonymous reactions and feedback about their proposal. This often results in thoughtful, honest feedback and will inform the superintendent and the community in constructive ways. It also communicates the importance of transparency, openness and learning from others. All wonderful messages to convey.

3. Don't be the smartest person in the room:

In an informal conversation with a superintendent, we talked about another well known, very public superintendent who was a colleague of ours. My conversation partner's telling comment was: *He's absolutely brilliant in so many ways, unfortunately, he has to let everybody know it"*.

I have worked with several superintendents who suck the air out of any room they are in. They move to the center of the conversation, seeking attention and airspace. They act as if they are the only people in the room with any ideas.

Arrogance is not a leadership trait but a deep, personal flaw which, I believe brilliant people are susceptible. An arrogant leader sets up a strange dynamic in a school district that is played out in several ways:

- Followers tend to shut down in the leader's presence and do not add to the dialogue and discussion. The result is that the superintendent is less informed about almost everything. This is not good.
- Interaction with teachers and parents can become contentious because they feel disrespected by the superintendent's arrogance and begin to challenge every small or large idea the superintendent promotes. Debate and ridicule rule the day and contentiousness becomes the norm.

- “Brilliant” leaders might travel down a path that could hurt them professionally and, in some cases, the district. Followers acquiesce and let them proceed in the hope that the experience might teach them a lesson. It never does because it’s always someone else’s fault not theirs. Reflection is not a trait of arrogant leaders.

If you have a brilliant, arrogant superintendent, my sympathies. If you are looking to hire a new superintendent and want to avoid an arrogant one, some advice:

The good news is that arrogant people simply cannot help themselves; they have to share their brilliance with you. During the superintendent’s search interviews, pay careful attention to the candidate’s answers; they will tell you everything you need to know. If you feel lectured to rather than participating in a dialogue, be careful. If you hear terms like, “*it’s obvious*” or “*well, it’s really rather simple*”, be cautious. Arrogant people love questions because they create the platform for them to share their brilliance. Pay attention to the questions they ask because they tend to be few in number because they think they already know everything.

4. Build “relational” capital:

This point might well be the most important advice I can offer. Without positive, mature and authentic relationships with people throughout the district, especially, parents and teachers, a superintendent cannot lead successfully. Relationships are the “currency” in school districts and need to be built and maintained if a superintendent is going to take their district to a better place.

Fortunately, building relational capital does not require charisma, which can actually be a liability in public education. Most teachers don’t trust charm but do appreciate authenticity, intelligence and integrity. The very best superintendents I know lead quietly and nurture respectful relationships throughout their districts

Superintendents can build “relational capital” in several ways:

- Be transparent with your decision making about important district matters. Stakeholders appreciate understanding the thinking behind and the rationale for important decisions. This is usually best done in small groups and face-to-face meetings and will take time but the pay-off is worth it.
- Be visible and accessible throughout the school district. People need to feel the presence of their superintendent. Attending diverse events, both large and small, in the schools is one way to do this. Holding “town hall” meetings periodically during the year is a great way to build community, listen to people’s hopes and concerns and get a public pulse of the place. They can be invaluable. Don’t over orchestrate these events, keep them informal, and collegial.
- Share relevant information widely throughout the district. A monthly or bi-weekly superintendent’s e-mail message is an effective way to communicate what is going on. Make sure there is good content in these letters, or they become perfunctory and a waste of time. Use them to celebrate the good news that is happening throughout the district. People need to hear about the good stuff, the bad stuff is already in the rumor mill.
- Be a good listener. Most superintendents I have met would consider themselves excellent listeners; however, I have found that to be rarely true. Many senior leaders are much better at advocacy than they are at inquiry. Listening well and authentically is very hard to do. It takes patience, curiosity and humility; all wonderful but challenging leadership qualities.

When followers feel truly listened to, they will share their hopes and fears, aspirations and stories. Most importantly, it conveys respect and value for others. It also provides the superintendent with a quality of information ,few leaders ever receive.

- Understand the importance of “*cultural travelers*” .These are individuals throughout the district who are able to travel through the different cultures (e.g. teachers , staff, parents ,students) within an district and have productive and authentic relationships with each group. These “travelers” often act as bridge builders and translators between different groups.

People often describe these individuals as “*representing what’s best about this place*”. They have tremendous influence and insight and deeply understand how a district actually works. Often, these people don’t have fancy titles or appear high on the organizational chart, but everyone knows who they are. These are not gadflies or gossips flitting around. They are individuals who are deeply trusted by others and this gives them access to almost everyone in the district . This trust is earned because they are seen as serving the common good and what is best for the district . In short, they have tremendous relational capital.

Superintendents need to know who these travelers are and build a relationship with them. These relationships will leverage the superintendents time and efforts in powerful ways.

At the end of the day, a superintendent must do three things well. All simple to understand but very difficult to enact:

- They must be dedicated to achieve meaningful results for the school district; whether that is: improved academic excellence, increased graduation rates, an enhanced student experience, or improved community relations. Superintendents accomplish important things, how they do this defines the quality of life throughout the district. It is critical that everyone know what results the superintendent has been charged to achieve. This way the superintendent and the board can be supported and held accountable for clear goals and milestones.
- They must treat people with *care and humanity*. This care creates a sense of community that is sorely missed in many school districts . This feeling of community goes beyond getting excited about the football or basketball team. That has more to do with school spirit. Community is about people believing that people really matter and that together they can accomplish good, if not great, things in service of the mission, values and aspirations of the district . When a district has a deep sense of real community, the students who attend, the faculty who teach and the staff that serve feel connected to something greater than themselves.. Those leaders who have made a real difference in our school districts ,deeply understand how important a sense of community is to their and the districts overall success.
- Lastly, a superintendent must always act with integrity. Their actions and values need to be aligned and connected to the deeply held principles and values of the school district. This integrity helps create a deep, guiding principle about “how we do business here”. It sets a high standard for everyone throughout the district and creates a sense of authentic pride about the institution and what it stands for.

The superintendency is a challenging, difficult and often thankless job. We need good ones now more that ever before .Be conscious about why you want to lead a school district, because it is your aspirations not your appetites that will sustain you over the long haul.