

The Top 10 Mistakes that Principals Make

Julie McAvoy and Denise Rhodes

You're going to make mistakes every day.
But here are 10 you can avoid.

Both new and veteran principals make mistakes every day. It's the nature of the job. The trick is to minimize those mistakes. Through conversations with friends, teachers, supervisors, and drawing on our years of on-the-job personal experience, we have compiled our own unscientific David Lettermanesque "Top Ten" list of mistakes—and how to resolve them.

10 ■ *Not notifying your immediate supervisor.* We've all been in sticky situations where we weren't sure whether to call our supervisor—especially after an unexpected encounter with an angry parent or teacher.

Solution: Even if you're not sure, call. Never leave your supervisor out of the loop, only to have him or her learn about the situation from someone else. And remember to keep your supervisor informed of the good things as well as the bad things that are happening at your school.

9 ■ *Not respecting established policies and procedures.* Do you know where those big three-ring binders are that contain local board policies? Many of us may have even forgotten what they look like or what's in them. Or worse, we may have inadvertently bad-mouthed a board policy, unaware that we are putting our feet in our mouths.

Solution: Know how to access established policies and procedures and always refer to them when in doubt. In discussions with others, present policies in a positive light even if you don't agree with them. Like it or not, part of your job is to ensure compliance.

IN BRIEF

Two Texas principals use a David Letterman format to identify the 10 most common mistakes that principals make and offer their suggestions for avoiding or rectifying them.

8 *Being out of touch with reality.* It's very easy to get caught up with what's going on in your office and neglect to find out what's going on in the classrooms.

Solution: Be visible. Walk the building and greet students and teachers the first hour of each day. Go into the lunchroom and interact with the children and cafeteria staff. Get to know your students and establish a positive relationship with them.

7 *Having a lackadaisical attitude toward discipline.* You may find yourself spending a good portion of your day working with an uneven and ineffective disciplinary process. Or you may administer discipline and neglect to inform the parents.

Solution: Have a proven system in place and work with it. Establish who will first see the offender, you or the assistant principal, and make sure that the punishment fits the crime. A kindergartner calling someone a "stinky face" doesn't warrant the same penalty as two fifth-grade boys caught in a fistfight. Always call parents to inform them of their children's misbehavior and what the consequences will be.

6 *Not practicing effective internal communication.* Don't assume that everyone in your school knows what's going on. Teachers often tune out long announcements over the p.a. system in the morning and even during faculty meetings.

Solution: Keep everyone in the school informed of all changes, whether it's a revised class schedule or traffic-flow procedure. Remember that brief memos are an effective way to keep teachers informed, and that opening your office door during their planning times makes it convenient for them to communicate with you.

5 *Neglecting to follow through.* This is an area that is particularly bothersome to teachers. You told them you would do something for them and you didn't deliver, time after time. No one likes lip service, and this is a credibility issue.

Solution: Tell people, "I'll look into it," but ask them to remind you again after a set period of time. Prioritize what is essential. You may have to say

"no" more times than you'd like, but once you've committed, make realistic deadlines and stick to them.

4 *Neglecting your teachers.* We let teachers know when they are doing a poor job but tend to overlook those who consistently do superior work. We also tend to support teachers in their professional work but not in their personal life.

Solution: Treat your teachers as professionals and give them encouragement and support to make changes that meet students' needs. Recognize their work by handing out positive notes to a few each week. Provide support for teachers who are having problems in their personal lives, since those problems can affect their school performance.

3 *Being too demanding.* Very often we have parents, supervisors, teachers, and school board members demanding improvement on high-stakes tests. Our first reaction may be to demand rather than encourage our teachers to produce those results, effectively reducing their morale.

Solution: Become the school cheerleader and do whatever you can to keep teachers motivated. Giving them some time off, sending handwritten notes, or even hiring a therapist to provide inexpensive neck massages in the teachers' lounge are just a few ways to accomplish this. Make sure the community knows when any of your teachers attends a workshop or gives a presentation. Publicize the good work they do.

2 *Overspending the budget.* As your school's chief financial officer, your signature on official records indicates that funds were spent in compliance with laws, regulations, and policies. Being careless about it is a sure way to get yourself into hot water—and your name in the headlines.

Solution: Even though you may have an administrative assistant who is a whiz with figures, it is still up to you to carefully audit your accounts. Check them often and make sure they are balanced. It's a good idea to give your campus action team input into the school budget and get their approval for your expenditures. In fact, in some states that's the law.

1 *Lacking balance in your life.* Think of your day as a circle divided into three sections, representing your work, your family, and yourself. When you devote too much time to one part, the other parts must shrink in order to complete the circle.

Solution: Although the demands of running a school may take up much of your day, try to keep each of the three sections as equal as possible. If you find yourself out of balance, pull back so that the other sections do not suffer.

Of course, there are many other mistakes that principals can—and will—make. But paying attention to these "Top Ten" will help you achieve the goal of being an effective and nurturing leader. ☐

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WEB RESOURCES

The ERIC Digest "Mistakes Educational Leaders Make" examines where and how most principals fail. Principals' mistakes ranged from poor human relations skills to poor decision-making.

<http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest122.html>

Education World surveyed 43 principals for its "Top Ten Leadership Traits."

www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin190.shtml

Principal, in its March 2001 issue, presents a veteran principal's perspective in "Ten Principles for Principals."

www.naesp.org