

Leadership Competencies Today

By Dr. Rita Girondi, Training Masters, Inc.

In 2002, the article “Key Components of Successful School Leadership” was published in *Career Education Review*. Comparing managers to leaders, the article focused on the premise that a leader needs good management skills, but good management skills do not make a leader. Considering the necessary skills of leaders in career colleges and schools twelve years ago, what’s different today, if anything, that impacts leadership effectiveness? This question launched interesting exchanges among a group of leaders with years of experience working with career colleges and schools. In addition, supporting the goals of many campus managers and leaders through numerous years has provided me great comparative insight.

Over the years, some of the challenges have been the multitude of regulations with significant “higher

education” changes, the job market, the cost of education, economic turmoil, technology impacts, a “not college material” deeply flawed stigma, complicated financial aid processes, staffing fluctuations and the needs

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and expectations of students. Undoubtedly, things have changed – or have they – when it comes to leading our colleges and schools? Perhaps very little has changed categorically, but clearly, there is change and the challenges have become more challenging! Further discussion on a few of these categories led to enlightening considerations.



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In order for today's campus leaders to be effective, certain skills are necessary. While these areas are not "new" expectations, they do have new twists and require greater incorporation into every leader's role. They should

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be considered critical priorities. They include more accountability, strong ethics, team building, adaptability, attention to detail and resourcefulness, particularly when it comes to thinking and staying ahead of the curves while always being

prepared for change.

In order to guide others in these priorities, today's leaders must be relationship builders constantly inspiring the team. With student success as the ultimate goal, seeking to create the best educational experiences for them along with the strongest job entry opportunities involves creating a total campus focus on the process and the outcomes. The leaders must embrace the mission of career colleges and schools, build the campus culture within the scope of that mission and orchestrate a strong commitment to compliance confidence!

Regulations have always led campus leaders to focus on compliance and train employees to do the same. This is becoming more challenging because of the time that has to be devoted, particularly to the changes and the reporting requirements. "Accreditation has become more rigorous which overall makes us better," stated one participant in this discussion who also emphasized that today's campus leaders have to be front-minded with greater attention to the regulations.

Another participant commented on the time element. School leaders have to stay focused on regulations without becoming consumed by them. In the strongest sense, regulations can become a distraction stealing time from visibility and availability for day-to-day operational needs such as coaching employees, "roaming" the halls interacting with students and staff, observing classes occasionally and coordinating other relationship-building activities that separate leaders from managers and great cultures from mediocre ones.

"Today, compliance is everyone's job!" In new employee orientations, in job descriptions, in performance reviews, during staff meetings and part of everyday duties, all staff members must have a first-hand understanding of how the regulations apply to them and their responsibilities. Campus leaders must ensure that all employees are well-informed of the expectations and kept up-to-date. Working in a highly-regulated environment should not stifle the discussions associated with improving operations. The regulations provide a framework which effective leaders respect as they encourage employees to think strategically regarding areas of growth and improvement. It presents a challenging balance!

The evolution of technology has created interesting challenges and huge opportunities in recent years. Decisions and timing rule! The old adage, "He who hesitates is lost!" has probably never been so true. Technology has impacted every area of campus operations and will continue to do so at a pace that allows no hesitation. Everything is instantaneous! Leads from interested students, text replies in return, data storage and retrieval, report generation, forms processing, SAP monitoring and more happen at push-button speed.

Today we have multiple ways of communicating, offering training sessions and conducting meetings without leaving our offices, homes or cars. While technology has provided faster, even instant communication, it requires a different dynamic of leaders guiding their teams. “It’s good from a time management perspective but can be very impersonal. We have better, faster tools at our disposal, but we can lose quality. For example, in the past, there were more check points for accuracy of reports. Three or four sets of eyes reviewed reports. In many cases, those extra eyes aren’t there today.”

In some ways, our improved 24/7 technology capabilities have intruded into our personal space or at least blurred it significantly! The convenience and time/cost savings continue to drive us to using these enhanced methods of communication. Today’s campus leaders need these interactive skills, yet their challenge is to preserve the personal connections that can easily be sacrificed at great cost to the culture.

While technology’s impacts continue to change the way we conduct our campuses, the most fascinating element by far is the way it has altered students’ learning experiences. First, consider the program offerings and the growing interest in online learning with its accommodating, flexible structure. Second, consider the availability of technology tools to enhance learning. The mannequins in the classroom corners and the charts on the walls are gone – almost! Now students learn the chambers and conditions of the heart by watching a video, hearing the heart beat and reacting to its distress on computers. Third, consider the access to information for conducting research, reinforcing understanding and building knowledge power. Fourth, instructional delivery brings technology

into the classroom with the students using their own devices to access the teacher’s presentation, review the class later online and study with other Internet learning support tools almost eliminating the need for textbooks. Technology’s impact doesn’t end.

There are many more considerations, but one thing is definite! Learning has changed and today’s

leaders need to embrace it as they guide their faculties in accessing the best learning strategies, modifying curriculum, ensuring that employer needs are

met and providing the delivery and scheduling options that students demand. “They have become savvier and their expectations are higher. We have to adapt to their expectations or run the risk of not being up-to-date.” This is an exhausting but exciting process because it will continue to evolve and involve every aspect of the education process. One major challenge is taking what can be a very impersonal experience for students and making it valuable. “We’ve become a better customer-focused industry and we need to continue to progress in that direction.”

Motivating faculty to use technology effectively and overcome any fears or confidence gaps presents a huge challenge and opportunity for campus leaders. Investment in new technology involves a major financial decision. So, ensuring that instructors are competent and confident in using new teaching tools and delivery designs cannot be overlooked. Perhaps the biggest challenge in this area for the leader is to instill in every instructor the desire to learn and utilize new technologies as they emerge and students come to

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us already aware of them. Campus leaders will be constantly guiding their teams in re-designing the educational experiences for students.

With the current economy, declining job opportunities and new employment laws, it can be difficult working with employers, and many of them are in various stages of technology implementation. Some still prefer the traditional

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resume – interview process while others are reviewing resumes and conducting initial interviews online. Schools need to accommodate both approaches as technology

transitions occur. Students must be prepared to approach employers and job opportunities both ways. For current students and graduates, schools must provide an online presence and prepare them to use online job search and networking opportunities. Today, we have the ability to respond quickly to employer needs by delivering resumes for their review in seconds, and again the campus leader guides the way. Building relationships with employers and accommodating their needs their way poses another challenge and opportunity.

So, have leadership competencies changed? The consensus of the experienced leaders is that some are new and some are the same. The discussions highlighted a few areas that always were and still are essential. It is more important than ever, and perhaps more difficult than ever, for campus leaders to build the “total school effort”[®] culture so that everyone’s roles weave together to ensure student success and the achievement of campus goals. The challenge today is ensuring

that part-time employees, adjunct and online instructors as well as other staff members who work remotely all feel a connection to each other and to the school. The importance of creating togetherness, loyalty and a sense of belonging will never change, and it starts with the campus leader who sends signals throughout the organization all the time. “The changes and the challenges open up a huge horizon if the leaders embrace the change. Leadership is more important than ever!” Developing people by paying attention to them, investing in their growth and providing opportunities to them continues to define leadership

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effectiveness. Along with nurturing a sense of belonging, this is a critical step in creating a place where people love to work, where the leader’s contagious passion filters through the organization, where the school’s mission is embraced and excellence in each person’s work is inspired by the excellence of the campus leader. As the years pass and new challenges surface, one thing will remain constant – the campus leader holds the keys to the success of the students, the staff and the school.

School Leadership Checklist

Here is a simple self-evaluation tool that school leaders can use frequently to ensure a balance in leadership impact. A weekly review of the items listed, provide an overall perspective on the many components a school leader's role. Keep this tool in a daily planner and glance over it for a refresher, or review it periodically with the school's management team for establishing goals for everyone.

- I have been highly visible throughout the school.
- I have been practicing good listening habits.
- My managers are working well together.
- The planning process is executed effectively.
- Everyone is focused on the principles that guide our school.
- Optimism is contagious in my school.
- I set an effective example of what I expect from others.
- The Total School Effort ® is alive and well in my school.
- In all situations, the dignity of others is consistently respected.
- I know my people individually and what motivates them.
- My staff feels a sense of ownership in our school.
- I train and explain regularly.
- Staff support for and participation in student and school events is strong.
- I have established a strong basis for trust, both for me and among the staff.
- I balance firmness with compassion.
- Staff development is a priority.
- I am viewed with a high degree of credibility.
- Meetings are conducted regularly and effectively.
- My staff is very well informed.
- I have observed a class or meeting recently.
- We celebrate our successes and special events.
- I regularly give compliments and send notes of appreciation.
- I keep my word and deliver what I promise within the expected time.
- The policies and procedures that we follow are understood and helpful.
- I have learned more about an area of the business in which I have had no direct experience.
- I am delighted with the initiative that people take.
- Our system of reports and data analysis tremendously aids in running the school.
- In the event of my absence, everything would continue as scheduled.
- Each department in the school is running smoothly.
- The normal dynamic tensions in the business are actually strengthening agents.
- I delegate but don't abdicate.
- My staff is very alternative conscious.
- We regularly promote from within.
- The employees have numerous opportunities to grow and develop.
- The performance evaluation system is an integral part of each employee's development.
- Communication is clear and open.
- Daily operations run smoothly for students and staff.
- Problems are identified quickly and resolved effectively.
- My office reflects my insistence on good organizational skills and facility appearance.
- My staff sees the big picture.
- I ensure that my hours in the school make my presence and availability known across all sessions.

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