

Module 1

“Which Way Is North?”

Do you possess a definition of the principalship? Should you have one? If yes, why should you have one?

You may be tempted to brush aside these questions—after all, as an entry-year principal, you completed the course work, you passed the qualifying tests, and the district leadership selected you for the job. You probably feel a sense of urgency to start working on the tasks that warrant your attention as the new principal. Why spend time defining the principalship, which appears to be such an academic exercise?

Well, to make this a bit more practical, let us assume that early into the school year, during your goal-setting conference, your supervisor queries you about your perception of the principalship. Or in a different scenario, a news reporter, who is interviewing you as the “new principal,” asks you to list what you see as the most important aspects of being a school leader. The importance of possessing a personal definition of the principalship may take on more relevance under such circumstances.

More importantly, your personal definition of the principal’s role is crucial to your performance as the school leader. *If you do not define the job, the job will define you.* If you do not have priorities that guide how *you* decide to spend *your* time and energy, others will dictate how you spend your time and energy.

Granted, you cannot operate in a vacuum, doing only the things that you prefer. You will find yourself expending a considerable amount of time attending to the wants and needs of others. For example, unless you are independently wealthy and can tender your resignation whenever you choose, your decisions about how to spend your time may be shaped by others more than you anticipate. If you need to keep your job and your boss wants the window shades in all classroom windows pulled to a certain level at the end of each school day, you may find yourself revising your definition of the school leader’s role so that it includes such a detail. Additionally, there are always those emergencies, or other interruptions, that annihilate your best attempts to be organized and in control of your activities. Without possessing some core beliefs about the role of the school principal, you risk having your day, your

week, even your career as a school leader driven primarily by unexpected events and the agendas of other individuals and groups. You must balance the real with the ideal—integrating the realities of your job, shaped primarily by the people with whom and for whom you work, with your personal perspective on how principals should provide school leadership.

What is this “school leadership” that you are to provide? Through the years, numerous experts have conducted exhaustive studies and expressed an incalculable number of words in an attempt to define leadership. Chief among these efforts has been the study of leader traits, leader behaviors, contingency and situational theories, leader effectiveness through power and authority, and, more recently, leading through coaching or influencing others toward accomplishing personal and organizational goals.

Some writers choose to define *leadership* by distinguishing it from *management*, one notable researcher asserting that leaders focus on doing the right thing, whereas managers attend to doing things right (Bennis, 1989). I maintain that effective school principals, in part because they are the epitome of middle management, must do both—lead, by doing the right things, and manage, by doing things right. To achieve a gestalt that blends the two functions into a seamless performance of duty, I commend to you the “Head, Heart, and Hand” concept, which Sergiovanni (1992) offers in response to the question “What is leadership, anyway?” In a discussion about the reinvention of leadership, the Sergiovanni asserts that the heart shapes the head, which in turn drives the hand; that is, what you value and believe (in your heart) influences your perspective (in your head) of how the world works, and that drives your decisions, actions, and behaviors (through your hands). Sergiovanni emphasizes the subtle significance of our subconscious mind-set, observing that, “The mental pictures in our heads about how the world works—are often tacitly held. They program what we believe counts, help create our realities and provide a basis for our decisions” (pp. 7–8).

To conclude, only you can answer the first question posed at the opening of this module about whether you possess a definition of the principalship.

To the other two questions, I say this: Yes, you should possess a definition of the principal’s role, because your definition helps you stay on course. It serves as your compass; it provides direction. It reminds you “which way is north.”