

Introduction

When you enter the workplace, you never leave it at zero. You either make it a little better or a little worse.

—Buckingham and Coffman
First, Break All the Rules

School leadership just isn't what it used to be. When French companies start offering back-to-school "bully insurance" to reimburse parents and pupils for property that is damaged or stolen by other kids and when the National Education Association (NEA) starts selling "homicide insurance," providing benefits to the families of teachers killed on the job, you know something is different.

Times change. Families change. Kids change. And schools change. Our world won't tolerate stationary entities. So school leaders have to change, too.

To survive and thrive as a principal or superintendent anymore, administrators have to learn new skills, invent new techniques, dust off some forgotten strategies and retrofit some others. That's where the little book you're holding comes in.

School Leadership From A to Z is a hard-hitting, hands-on guide for school officials offering a different look at what it takes to be an effective leader in today's schools. It covers every aspect of school leadership from A (Attitude and Ambiguity Tolerance) to Z (Zen for School Leaders) and everything in between.

And it does all this by combining the best thinking from today's best schools with proven ideas (which many educators don't know about or don't realize will work in schools) taken directly from successful businesses and other public and private organizations.

This is the first-ever handbook for educational leaders to draw heavily on tough lessons from business and life, as well as from successful school experiences.

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As educators, we sometimes look down on and distance ourselves from the “crass” business community as if the business mentality is somehow inferior or beneath us. Likewise, we tend to think that what works for effective business leaders won’t work with school personnel. Wrong on both counts!

These are self-defeating attitudes, which often rob educators of a rich resource for bettering our schools and becoming more effective school leaders. After all, if Bill Gates can’t teach us something about how to get results, who can?

As it turns out, much of what makes a great business organization tick can help make an effective school click as well. Schools, businesses, and other organizations are more alike than we realize. (“The most important difference between business and academia is this: In business everything is dog eat dog. In academia it’s just the opposite.” —E. John Rosenwald Jr.) Schools can learn a lot from business. After all, your school is a business—and much more.

That’s why this how-to guide blends proven traditional success secrets for school leaders with newfound strategies and fresh approaches taken directly from the nation’s business and other public and private organizations outside the education community. Each section is packed with real-world tips and insights that can work in any school.

The following sections are full of trade secrets for modern-day principals and superintendents. From cover to cover, the text pinpoints the specific attitudes, attributes, roles, rules, and practices that boost the best administrators toward lasting success. It’s not theory. It’s just what works.

This fresh approach carries over into four resource sections: *A New Vocabulary for School Leaders*; *What Business Leaders Say About Leadership That School Leaders Need to Hear*; *Business Books You Might Want to Read to Become a Better School Leader*; and *Borrowing From Business—Bright Ideas You Can Use in Your School Starting Tomorrow Morning*. This extra material alone makes the book worthwhile reading for success-minded school leaders.

To facilitate quick reading and easy use, the guide is organized into 26 compact sections (one for each letter of the alphabet). Each section stands alone, offering provocative, insider insight into critical elements of school leadership. Together they cover everything it takes to run a school today. It’s a different format that favors busy professionals. It’s easy to read. And hard to forget.

Being a principal or superintendent is more difficult than it ever has been—and more important. That’s why all school leaders need help, support, and backup today.

Sometimes the cavalry comes in the form of a small book with big ideas. Reading the following pages won’t make your job as easy as A, B, C, but it will make it more manageable and more fun.

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Of course, just mastering the letters of the alphabet won't guarantee that students will become great readers or writers, but it does give them a leg up. Likewise, mastering the tools and techniques in the succeeding sections won't ensure your success as a school administrator. But it will increase the odds in your favor and give you a real shot at lifting your school beyond the ordinary.

No real leader would ask for more.