

# Supervisory Officers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By Darlene Leaver and Frank Kelly

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## The Impact of Current Reform on Traditional Models of Leadership

Ontario education has seen major reform in the past six years. The changes include

- amalgamation into large systems;
- introduction of new curriculum guidelines;
- changes in the workload of teachers;
- centralization of funding according to inflexible formulas;
- safe school legislation;
- increased testing and assessment of students;
- testing and certification changes for teachers; and
- a general move towards measured accountability and public disclosure and involvement.

Accompanying these changes has been the development of a relatively hostile environment in the schools. Staff have been in open conflict with government on a number of issues related to workload and expectations. This has led to work slowdowns and even strikes as the government has been immovable in its desire to impose changes on a strict schedule.

An extreme example of the conflict was the elimination of co-curricular activities for most of the 2000-2001 school year. Settlements brought a restoration in 2001-2002, but the climate in schools and the desire of staff to volunteer was changed significantly, perhaps forever.

The financial restrictions of these times have had a huge impact on school system leaders. The flexibility of initiating at the local level has disappeared in most cases. Programs have been restricted; staff are not available to do extra planning or designing or to participate in committee work of this kind. Just as the angst of cocurricular subsided, the initiative for teacher testing and performance appraisal was heightened, creating a further crisis in relations between teachers and the government.

Working in a climate of change is difficult for leaders but it is more difficult when there is constant reaction and disagreement about fundamental direction as there has been between government and staff.

Change is endemic to education these days but the changes in society are perhaps even more demanding on education leaders. The pace of communication, the evolution of technologies, the emergence of world conflicts, the changing fabric of our culture and the slowing economy are all factors that have an impact on leadership.

Educators cannot solve all of the world's ills. Educational leaders must work within the confines that society provides and look for solutions to satisfy the needs of government, local school districts, and operating staffs.

## **Leadership Qualities and Skills in the New Millennium**

To lead successfully today, senior administrators of school districts must have a large complement of skills, some of them new skills. First, the good education leader must have knowledge of the business of education. He or she must know the culture of schools and education models, the way that effective teachers interact with students, and the expectations of students, parents, and community. There must be a keen awareness of what is acceptable in curriculum and assessment, in student social and personal development, and in capacity of staff in implementing programs and in working towards a high level of achievement for all students.

The effective leader of a school or a system must be energetic beyond the ordinary and be comfortable in the processes for resource management, strategic planning of projects, and time management. The job entails early and late meetings, endless reading and writing of reports, and being available to listen carefully to what is of importance or concern to every constituent. All of this makes for difficult days and a tough pace for even the strongest.

Educators have a duty to be communicators of the first order. In order to build relationships and create strategic community support, they must speak clearly and write concisely and they must recognize the audience in every case. Many situations that develop into serious conflicts start with misunderstandings. Too often someone misinterprets a memorandum or a letter and decides that a policy is unfair or unworkable. Without clarity and care, this can create serious problems and require endless efforts to solve.

The good supervisory officer in the 21st century has emotional intelligence in order to handle the great variety of staff needs. This includes a customer focus and awareness of the growing demands imposed by changes such as the introduction of new curriculum and the professional development necessary to continue to work at a high level.

A successful leader fosters a progressive attitude to change that is built on awareness of what education means to all of the stakeholders. Supervisory officers must develop skills to understand change and have a formal and considered plan for the implementation of government policies and local initiatives. Those who are not comfortable with change cannot lead effectively in the climate of 2002. An example of the requirement for a flexible and positive attitude to change and skill development can be found in the astounding impact of technology on the leaders of today. Leaders must adopt technology as the set of tools that will let them do their jobs well. Those who do not understand technology need not shy away from it. Rather, they should learn to make it useful so that they can work at the same level as their clients.

These are some of the skills and qualities ideal for the good education leader. Traditionally, good teachers and strong, confident organizers were taken from the classroom and asked to lead elementary and secondary schools. Then good principals were promoted to system leadership as supervisory officers. Raining programs for administrators emphasized knowledge of learning

processes, teaching skills, supervision patterns, classroom assessment models, organizational skills, public relations skills, and financial management techniques.

The traditional training programs for education leaders have assumed that good teachers can move quickly to become effective administrators who can develop and refine management techniques that take years to learn in other parts of our society. The pace and complexity of leadership in this new era does not provide the luxury of learning all needed skills while working on the job.

For education systems to remain strong as society changes, it will be necessary to provide our leaders with significant training in the management of complex systems. They will need models for delegating and empowering, models for measuring the work of their senior employees, models for planning and accountability for project development. And they will need intensive training in financial and human resource leadership as well as in learning processes.

Educators are provided increased learning data from standardized tests and from private assessments. It is essential that they learn to use this data effectively and to set growth targets regularly in collaboration with system leaders.

For some time there has been increased political and social pressure on educators. Good administrators have reacted positively and made efforts to improve programs and relationships. To manage increasingly complex interpersonal relations requires training.

Large school districts are complex business organizations. As such, they require the adept management of a skilled business professional with knowledge of business structures and organizational development. Preparation of senior education leaders should take this into account.

## **Moving Ahead Now**

All of these skills will contribute to the strong, sophisticated education leader of this new era. The ideal would combine the best of the research, management, business, and academic worlds with a smooth approach to human relations and the media.

The challenge faced by professional organizations for senior leaders is to provide interesting cost-effective programs and courses aimed at upgrading skills and filling the gaps with strong, qualified candidates.

To do this, we must communicate the positive nature of the work of the supervisory officer. District school boards can no longer wait for candidates to apply. They must seek, select, and nurture strong employees who have the aspiration and the potential to lead positively. They must provide mentors to work with these candidates and give them personal attention and practical tips. Boards must train the mentors so that they are kept current on local expectations and demands of the job. And district school boards must provide future leaders with real projects to test their abilities working with the resources available in a real situation.

Most importantly, district school boards must view succession for their leadership as a necessity and they must budget for it on a regular basis. That budget must include allocation of time for the project work, provision of courses where needed, and payment to mentors to improve their contribution.

Finding and sustaining good leaders will be the mark of a progressive district school board in the next few years. Those boards which are successful will demonstrate their results through growth of effective and progressive programs. The results will be seen in continued student achievement and parental satisfaction.

## Skills and Qualities of the Sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> Century Superintendent

- Emotional intelligence
  - Strong oral and written communication skills
  - High energy level
  - Combination of academic and business skills
  - Systems-based management
- Alternative dispute resolution
  - Flexibility and adaptability
  - Change management
  - Data and assessment literacy



**Darlene Leaver**

Superintendent,  
Toronto District School  
Board,

Persident,  
Public Supervisory  
Officials' Association



**Frank Kelly**

Executive Director,  
Public Supervisory  
Officials' Association