Preventing for your Next Leadership Position

The search for your next job requires planning, proper packaging and perseverance. You can’t ace an interview for a top position in leadership without preparing in advance.

**Transitioning to a new** level of leadership can be exciting and challenging but not necessarily for everyone. As you consider moving on to a new job opportunity you may want to reflect upon the following questions as you set out on your journey.

**Have you developed a long term career plan?**

The wise quote, “Fail to plan, plan to fail” reminds us of the importance of setting goals, developing strategies to achieve those goals, and taking action steps to get things done.

As educators, we are constantly planning our next event, meeting, project or academic achievement; we almost do this without thinking. Successful educators understand how good planning helps them deal with the unexpected that inevitably occurs.

Some people decide to become administrators overnight without much thought or planning. They comb through job openings and fill out application forms with the dream of moving on and picking up a bigger paycheck.

These applicants often end up frustrated or embarrassed as they find themselves unprepared to deal with questions asked in high stakes interviews. You may choose to begin your journey that way, but this strategy often comes with stress and is not always rewarding.

Good planning makes all the difference in how quickly and far you advance in your career. If you desire to seek out a new position or make a lateral career move, a well thought out, deliberate career plan is a necessity. Some questions to consider when making your plan include:

• What kind of promotion are you looking for?

By Marilou Ryder
• Where do you see yourself at the end of your career?
• Are you willing to move to a new area?
• Are you prepared to wait for a job opening in your own district?
• Are you willing to engage in a long commute?
• Do you know the job duties for various positions in administration?

Without a plan in place, your dream to gain a new job can end up in disaster. Spend time addressing some of the steps required to create your long-term career plan.

Are you being granted interviews when applying for advanced positions of leadership?

Most newcomers are unaware of this important detail. You can’t get hired if you can’t get to the interview. Being granted an interview is one of the most important conditions for securing a job promotion. The process involves effectively packaging your written materials to get your foot in the door.

Part of that packaging includes obtaining recommendation letters and writing an outstanding cover letter and résumé. Résumés are often bulleted with job specifications. Districts screening these résumés already know the job qualifications of a principal.

They say, “OK we get it… you are ‘in charge’ of 30 teachers, but what have you accomplished with these teachers that makes you stand out?” The lack of accomplishments is one of the biggest errors seen on most résumés in the field of education.

Additionally, many applicants fail to write their accomplishments in a way that says they can do the next job. For example, if you are a school principal looking to move to a director or assistant superintendent position, make sure to describe your accomplishments in a way that convinces the screener you are capable of providing leadership at the district level.

An example of an accomplishment for a school principal looking to move on to the district office might first read something like this: “Created a schoolwide student attendance program that increased student attendance from 95 percent to 97 percent in two years.”

Rewriting this same accomplishment to resonate with district-level experience might take this approach: “Developed and executed a school student attendance program, increasing student attendance from 95 percent to 97 percent in two years. Provided leadership for district principals to implement similar attendance programs at their schools.”

A résumé takes time to build and should always be considered a “work in progress.” Develop your own résumé template and continue to update it regularly. In addition, “own” your résumé. If you create it, you will be able to call upon the details when interviewing.

A cover letter, also called a letter of introduction, is another key to gaining an interview. Along with your résumé, it should stand out in a crowd and show paper screeners you are ready for the job. If you apply for a position, obviously you think you have what it takes. Clearly, you think you are ready for a promotion or someone has encouraged you to do so. What does your paperwork say about you?

Can the paper screener read the font size or does one have to work hard to make out the words? Do you make it easy for screeners to notice your qualifications and warrant a “must see” at the interview level? Have you done some amazing work for students, saved the district money, increased student attendance, lowered discipline referrals, raised test scores, created a program that makes teaching more effective, or developed a new plan that everyone raves about?

If so, get them down in writing right now. Make a list of all your actions in your current job that could be considered accomplishments. You should have six to eight accomplishments for every position held.

Are you ready for a high-stakes interview environment and the wide range of questions that may be asked?

There are standard areas in educational administration a candidate should have knowledge about that are used to ask questions in any interview. Develop “Interview Crib Notes” relative to specific topics you will be asked about, including communication, student achievement, decision making, etc.

In some form or another you may be asked about good teaching: what it is, what makes a good teacher or how you would hire one. Don’t try to answer that question on the spot. Rather, prepare in advance three to four areas related to good teaching you can easily recall and lean on during the interview.

If you have these areas prepared in advance you can then elaborate on them and
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Here are four areas that could be addressed during the interview relative to good teaching:

• Possesses content area expertise.
• Can effectively develop an engaging researched-based instructional lesson.
• Demonstrates effective classroom management skills.
• Likes students.

Every job interview begins with the question, “Thank you for being here today and spending some time for us to get to know you better. Could you please take a few minutes and tell us why you believe your skills are a match for this position and/or why you want this position?” In other words: Why are you here?

In preparing for this initial question make sure you have an opening statement that shares a brief career history, specific strengths and why you want to work for the school district.

An applicant must prepare and practice before attending this important one-shot opportunity. You don’t get a second chance. You can’t ask, “Hey do you mind if I come back in and start over?” Those who succeed in gaining new jobs have a few things in common. Winning candidates are confident in the interview. They walk into the interview conference room at ease, with a smile on their face, shaking everyone’s hand if the opportunity presents itself.

They gracefully accept any water offered, take a seat, sit back with hands folded and smile. They are dressed for the occasion; often in a navy or black suit and, if female, have no signs of distracting jewelry, perfume, strange hair or makeup.

Successful job candidates share an opening story or something to ease their nervous energy; something simple like how nice the drive was on the way to the interview. Occasionally, the lead interview says, “Take the hot seat, young man.” Everyone laughs. Some candidates are good on the come-back... “Looks like it’s my turn for American Idol.”

After the first question is asked, or if the timing is right, the candidate takes a quick moment to thank everyone in the room for the opportunity to interview. Nothing special or over the top, just a quick statement: “Before we begin I would like to take a moment to say thank you for affording me the opportunity to interview.” That’s it, short and simple.

Then the interview begins.

The easy questions are usually first, progressing to the more difficult. Sometimes one person asks all the questions; sometimes everyone in the room takes a question. It makes no difference, winning candidates look around at everyone as they answer each question in under two or three minutes, no longer.

Answers are filled with knowledge, personal experiences and examples. Stellar candidates know how to leverage their experiences and skills throughout each question to show how they can contribute to the new position.

Those who make it to the finals always give examples of good work or programs they have developed. Every winning candidate also has a heartfelt moment in the interview. The candidate finds just the right question to share a heartwarming story proving to the panel, “I have heart; I have integrity, hire me!”

While a little bit of “personal” goes a long way, outstanding candidates know how to weave their personal touch into every interview. They share a story about helping a student who has gone astray, talk about why they chose education, or share their version about coming to America as an isolated and frightened non-English student. People respond to some candid moments, and a small dose of interview emotion can take many candidates over the finish line.

Forgetting to mention students can also curse an interview. A search consultant once divulged that, in her experience of overseeing hundreds of superintendent interviews, only one in five candidates made a comment about students. “These applicants get overly technical in there and forget why they came into the business. When candidates forget to talk about our main product, the children, an interview panel loses interest. This is a
people – a kid – business; tell us how you love kids and want to make a difference.”

**Do you have the time to prepare for a stellar interview?**

You can’t ace an interview for a top position in leadership without preparing in advance. It just doesn’t happen. If you plan to shine in an interview, you must answer key questions, be on your toes, sound smart, be sociable, and look like you know what you’re doing – this all takes deliberate preparation.

Before each interview, spend time on the district’s website to learn about their goals and test scores. If applying for a district-level position, call the county office and request a copy of the district’s budget. Spend an afternoon charting ideas gleaned from the budget and share them in the interview.

One principal put it very aptly: “I’ve interviewed for five different districts, and each time I spend hours researching their test scores, strategic, technology and instructional action plans. While I’m disappointed that I am not getting these jobs, I have learned some amazing things that people are doing in other school districts. I have implemented many of these programs in my own district as a result of my job research.” What a positive perspective to bring to the interview process.

**Are you tired of coming in “second”?**

Coming in second is good, right? No, coming in second is agonizing, excruciating and just plain hurts. No matter how you slice it, coming in second is painful and worse than not making the finals. So close, yet no success.

Did you know that it takes prospective superintendent candidates approximately six interviews to land their first superintendent position? The rate of interviews climbs higher for the second superintendent. On average, an assistant principal can expect to interview at least five times before gaining a principal position. So it figures, someone has to come in second, and if you are getting close to the prize, second place is not a bad place to be.

What can be unfortunate, however, is to continue to accept the loss and do nothing to change the situation. Second placers have to work harder in many ways. They must believe in themselves and not take it personally. They must get back up and try again and not give up. They must try to determine why they came in second.

Sometimes a search consultant or personnel director will meet with a candidate to review the interview. One candidate called the director of human resources after interviewing for an assistant superintendent position requesting to discuss the interview. During the conference the human resource director shared, “You did a great job in the interview. The panel loved you. However, I’d like to mention one thing. Two times in the interview you indicated you wanted to be a superintendent. This was an interview for an assistant superintendent, and your comment put the panel off. They didn’t want to hear you talking about becoming a superintendent.”

The candidate was thankful, and on her next interview left the superintendent part out and was promoted to assistant superintendent. While her long-term goal involved being a superintendent, she learned to focus on the job at hand and not distract the interview panel.

If you continue to come in second, try to find out if there were any speed bumps in your last interview. Many district educators overseeing a search will share something that can help you improve, as they too have walked in your shoes. If you can’t gain access to that information, sit down and take a hard look at your performance and ask yourself what it would take to make your interviewing skills a “10.”

**Have you checked your social media platforms or asked someone “What’s the scoop out there on me?”**

Maintaining a professional reputation is purely an art form. As a leader, if you are doing good things for students, making difficult decisions, you are invariably making someone mad.

Don’t worry about those people; all good leaders have made someone angry because they disagree with them. Rather, concentrate on your own “professional brand.” Google yourself to find out what employers may be seeing about you on social media and if it’s not positive, take steps to delete negative social media. Some strategies might include:

- Do not include links on your résumé to any sites that include content not appropriate for a business audience.
- Be very careful what you put online. If you have a Facebook account, people you won’t want to be reading your profile may be able to access it, even if you think nobody will read it. Make your account private, so only your friends can access it.
- Be extra careful and don’t post anything you don’t want a prospective employer to read. Never show yourself with a drink in your hand or partying in excess.
- Finally, if you’ve been waiting to secure a job in your own district but have not received encouragement from those who matter, find
**Superintendents in Demand**

It is a very good time to be looking for a job as a school district superintendent. The demand for qualified applicants is high, and the supply, apparently, is low. If you are an experienced leader with a good track record, you can expect some very attractive offers if you enter the job market.

Of course, the reason for this favorable supply and demand situation is that this is a particularly challenging time to be a school superintendent. You’re under constant scrutiny; you’re expected to be accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week; and you will probably have to look for a new job and relocate in the next four or five years.

If you are a central office administrator contemplating applying for a superintendent’s position, you probably realize that your current situation is normally more stable. You’re probably earning 80 percent to 90 percent of what your boss makes, but your job is typically much safer. If you’re in your 50s, you can look forward to an attractive pension, or you could top off your career by applying for one of the many superintendent positions available.

In my limited research, I have found that school districts are looking for a superintendent who can walk on water. In fact, I always chuckle every time I read a brochure where a district is conducting a search. In the professional and personal characteristics’ sections, they typically describe the Good Lord. I always expect to read the following in the fine print: May settle for one of the 12 Apostles.

Given today’s political climate, coupled with an unsettled economy, it is not surprising that superintendent positions are becoming less attractive. Many districts are experiencing a shortage of qualified candidates, and more retirements are expected over the next few years.

In the attempt to re-build the pool of candidates to fill the role of superintendent, I believe the first step is to get rid of the notion that every superintendent must be a superhero. Although there are extraordinary leaders all over the country who can skillfully balance most, if not all, of the dimensions of leadership, the problem is not fundamentally one of locating superstars. The real issue is how to structure leadership jobs and prepare people for them so that individuals who are proficient and committed, but not necessarily extraordinary, can succeed.

In the end, one thing appears to be certain. There will always be a need for strong leadership in our schools. If you are one of those individuals who believe that you have something to offer, don’t hesitate to get out there and apply. The superintendent’s position can certainly be extremely rewarding and satisfying.

– John Almond

Advocate on the ACSA Member Assistance and Legal Support Team and co-director of the ACSA Mentoring Program.
Do you know what to do once you begin the job search or when offered a new position?

Advance notification and planning produces a positive exit strategy that keeps people talking well about you for years to come, even though they may be angry you are leaving them. Strategies to overcome this concern include sending out press releases and/or composing a letter in advance to be disseminated to staff immediately after your announcement.

One superintendent shared that he received a call from a neighboring district asking about the qualifications of his assistant superintendent who applied for a job. The superintendent was shocked and shared his discontent and disappointment over being blindsided. Have the professional courtesy to tell your boss you’re looking when the time approaches.

Do you know how to accept an offer of employment?

Finally, the phone call arrives and the person on the other end exclaims, “We love you, when can you start?” Don’t throw a party just yet, there’s a lot of work to do. Navigating this political road is like balancing on a tightrope, as evidenced by one applicant who accepted a position as an assistant superintendent in a neighboring district. She was well liked in her own district and wanted to “help them out” by submitting her letter of resignation before her official appointment to the new district.

You know how this story ends… the new district changed their decision in midstream and the applicant was now in the throes of a mini stress attack. Luckily her former district chose to take her back, but this whole incident could have been avoided if she had followed some simple protocols of not resigning from one district until the ink is signed on the other end.

Do you know how to negotiate a salary or employment contract?

Employment contracts are usually standard for superintendents and in some cases assistant superintendents. Some candidates are so relieved to finally be selected for this top position they neglect to read the “fine print” in the contracts they are asked to sign.

“Not to worry,” the district representative advises, “this is a boilerplate contract that’s been used for years in this district. The sooner we get this taken care of, the sooner you can be approved by the board.

There are many horror stories in our industry related to this very issue. There have been superintendents signing one-year contracts (standard is three), and others who signed agreements stating they could be demoted to a lower position if the board was not satisfied with their performance. One superintendent even agreed to a contract that stipulated he could not take a single vacation day without gaining board approval.

There are many reputable resources and people who can help you with contract negotiations, one being ACSA.

Do you have the resiliency to withstand rejection and keep applying for the positions you want?

Countless candidates who apply and interview for many jobs give up just when they are near the finish line. They’re at the top of their interview game, and suddenly want to quit and cash it in. “I’ve had it with the rejection,” one candidate moans. “My family can’t take this anymore. I must not be made for this work, if I keep losing out.”

Having a career coach or critical friend who can guide you through this dark tunnel is important. It is very difficult to take on this project alone, so when you feel like giving up, call your mentor.

Many applicants are afraid to share defeat because they think it makes them look bad in their own districts and their colleagues or bosses start doubting them. One superintendent applied five times in an attempt to make a lateral move to a larger district with more growth opportunity.

“My board is beginning to think they have a ‘loser on board,’” he said. “They are beginning to believe the self-fulfilling prophecy that if other districts don’t want me, why should they. I’m walking a fine line here.”

Research suggests it takes applicants about five interviews to make a lateral move and find a match that aligns with one’s talents and personality. As you know this journey can be a challenge, but do not give up in your attempt to move your career along or seek a new growth opportunity.

Are you prepared to make mistakes and learn from them?

We have been told throughout our lives that those who gain success and happiness in life must be willing to learn from their mistakes. Have no doubt about it, you will make mistakes as you apply for positions of advancement in your career, and you must learn from them.

More importantly, if you don’t take time to reflect upon what you did wrong, or what you may perceive as a casualty, you are bound to repeat the same mistake and lower your chances to achieve your goals.

If your failures cripple you, you may not have what it takes to move to the next level. However, if you are of the mindset that failures come with the territory, then you are in the right frame of mind for moving on in your leadership career.

School administrators have very rewarding, prestigious and powerful roles to play in education, and with this position of power they are able to make a difference for students, families and communities. Resiliency and the ability to look at and grow from one’s errors are the most critical components for gaining a new position – in addition to experiencing success on the job.

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