

# Great School Leadership: A's Not F's.

Presentation Given to School Leaders by Founder/C.E.O. Richard Norman Rickey

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**“Great schools require great leaders”.** We don't make a product that comes off an assembly line. No, we are in the people business, educating and leading young people to become the very best they can be. And the growth we see in our students is a direct result of what our educators infuse into their students. All of us in a leadership role at Orenda Education, both at the district office, and at each campus, must be outstanding, heads above the rest leaders who the great teachers want to work for and with. To get to the next level of greatness and consistency, not only in student achievement, but also in campus morale among the staff, we need to get better at leadership - leading people.

Here is what I believe about great leadership, whether you are leading an army, a hospital, a business or a school. Great leaders come in all different sizes, colors and personalities. Some are dynamic and charismatic, and some are quiet and unassuming. Some come from elite colleges, and some never finished college.

But, every great leader has mastered the following 10 managerial skills. Now, I can think of more than these ten necessary skills, but even God only had ten commandments so we will stick with just these ten. If you can get really good at these ten things, I believe you can become a great leader. If you only master 7 of these skills, you might be good, but you will not be great. But remember, good is not good enough at Orenda Education. Good is the enemy of great. I started this organization to offer a great educational choice, not just for the students and families, but also ----- for the educators.

For your students to achieve great academic results, you, the leader, must attract, grow and retain the highest quality teachers who love educating students in the school you lead. Many teachers leave poorly led schools to go work for people they perceive to be better school leaders. People are willing to be led by leaders they respect, and great leaders attract the most followers.

So here is an overview of what we are going to cover in our training that I have titled “Great School Leadership: A's Not F's.

## ***Great leaders detect and eliminate the five major causes of “F” scores.***

1. The first one is **Fear**. Average leaders intentionally, or unintentionally, create and perpetuate a climate of fear within the school. Staff may fear being singled out, embarrassed, or held accountable for results they have little control over. They may fear that a role they currently have in the school, and that they like, will be significantly changed, or taken away. They may fear that during the annual performance review they are going to receive some negative feedback for the very first time. They may avoid

speaking up for fear of being misunderstood, or receiving an angry response from the leader, so they don't share with the leader what behaviors exhibited by the leader are undermining their authority and credibility with the staff. Fear is the number one killer of a school's potential greatness. It must be addressed, eliminated and replaced by openness and safety.

Great leaders eliminate fear, and create a school climate where the truth can be heard.

2. **Faint Hearted** – your own fear as a leader. Average leaders avoid conflict because they lack confidence in their own ability to lead and to make difficult decisions that may be unpopular. They lack courage. The faint hearted leader won't address conflict with an individual, or worse, they don't believe the employee has the ability to discuss the conflict in a fair and healthy way, so the conflict gets ignored and spins out of control. The leader doesn't lead with their own heart when they need to confront, repair and improve relationships. They don't self-reflect. These leaders are thin skinned, not open to criticism, and defensive.

Great leaders have the courage to be open and they let others know that they value their opinion, including criticism. Great leaders give permission for their people to assert themselves, and their people know they are safe to be themselves.

3. **Factions.** Us vs Them. Average leaders don't take ownership over their school. They don't like to make tough decisions, but instead will often use the district as a crutch for their own failure to have courageous conversations and boldly support the district they work for. Divisive leaders blame the district for policies, rules, and budget constraints. Instead of explaining why the answer is no to spending requests, divisive leaders say; "oh, that was a district decision, I don't have any control over that".

On the other hand, sometimes the district micro-manages the campus leaders. School staff are allowed to run around the school leaders to the district office. Staff are allowed to "gang up" and "pile on" against a leader because the district doesn't have in place, or is not following, the "Courageous Conversations" policy and procedures for resolving conflict at the campus level, and keeping it there.

Great school campus leaders always own all decisions, including the "no's". Great district leaders trust the school campus leader, until they can't be trusted, then they make a leadership change.

4. **Forever** meetings and committees. Meetings organized by the average leader are too often, too long, not on point, and waste some attendees time. These leaders are not sensitive to, or respectful of, other people's time to the same extent that they value their

own time. Ineffective leaders don't delegate, and get bogged down on things that don't really matter, so they end up not getting the most out of their own talents.

Great leaders are disciplined in time management. They know where their time goes because they did a detailed study of their time, and, based on that information, implemented a personal time management system that works to eliminate wasted time, and increase productive time for themselves and their staff. Great leaders have a bias for action, and do first things first. They know what is most important.

5. **Fences.** Author G. K. Chesterton has an illustration that has become known as the "Chesterton's Fence" rule. It is a simple rule of thumb that suggests you should never destroy a fence, change a rule, or alter a tradition if you do not understand why it was created in the first place. Policies & procedures are like fences. They are not good or bad. It depends. So, as a leader, when you come to a fence you first need to understand why it is there before you tear it down. New leaders to a school should first seek to understand and respect the fences that the district or the former school campus leader erected. Weak leaders don't know or own the why of a rule or policy and procedure. As a school leader ask yourself; what fences have you put in place? Why? Do people know where the fences are, or do they just run into them without warning and get tangled up in the fence? Has the fence created unwanted or unhelpful turf wars? Do staff know the why? Are they invested and have they bought in?

Great leaders can explain why the fence is there, and they convey to the staff that the fence can and will be moved if it's not working. Great leaders know how to get buy in from their staff on important decisions that are made.

***Great leaders get the following five "A" scores from their people.***

1. **Authority.** Average leaders think they have authority because of their title, years of experience, bigger office, or because they have more letters after their name. They assume they are to be followed without question because they sit on top of the organizational chart. The staff below the leader on the org chart often feel dumbed on because they have very little control over what happens at the school. As a leader, if you are not respected by many staff, ask yourself; why not? What are you doing, not doing, or allowing to happen that is undermining your authority?

Great leaders are respected and followed simply because they exhibit the right kind of authority gained from participation, servanthood and leading by example. Great leaders don't ask people to do things they wouldn't do themselves. Great leaders also make sure there are clear and defined paths for all staff to address issues, grievances and the variations that occur in the school that negatively impact staff morale and school quality.

2. **Assurance** (trust). Many teachers remain resistant to a school leader's direction and wishes because they don't trust their leader. Untrustworthy leaders are known for flip-flopping on critical decisions and often get swayed by the winds of popular opinion. Their actions are not grounded on a firm foundation, nor principled.

While great leaders may be perceived by their staff to be extremely competent in at least one critical area of school operations, they don't act like they know it all. In fact, they come across to the staff as humble. Great leaders know they don't have to be an expert in all areas of school operations, but they convey a great vision for the school, and deep down in their core they believe it is possible to achieve only through their people. They assure the school staff that the vision is achievable, and they keep them informed on progress toward the goal. Milestones are celebrated. Pride and enthusiasm in the progress being made toward the goal is evident everywhere you look. The staff share in this belief because they trust the school leader, and they know the leader counts on them to make great things happen.

3. **Availability**. Average leaders say they have "an open door policy", but you find that staff rarely walk into the leader's office to have courageous conversations. They stay locked in their office for long periods of time, and rarely does anyone know what they are doing in there. When staff do walk in to the average leader's office, the discussions are usually trivial, and rarely do important decisions get made quickly and on the spot from these walk in meetings. Average leaders rely too much on written communication.

Great leaders get out and walk around -- a lot, catching their people doing great things. They have lots of conversations with their people. Many decisions can be made quickly, and on the fly with great leaders.

4. **Affirmation & Accountability**. Great leaders brag on their top performers, but they also hold everyone, starting with themselves, accountable. Because the staff witness other staff being praised, they too are motivated to do better, so they feel like they are a contributing member to something great. When a staff member has failed to meet the leader's standards, after courageous conversations have taken place, and the proper training and support has been given, that staff member is asked to leave. Staff who remain a poison to the school culture are removed immediately. Great leaders know it is better to have a hole in a position, than to have it filled by a person carrying a poison pill.
5. **Assembly** (effective team work). Average leaders try to do too much themselves. They don't delegate enough, or if they do, they micro-manage the person they delegated too. Average leaders rely too often on written and recorded documentation of what some

staff are not doing, or need to do better, rather than building relationships and trust through courageous conversations and courageous accountability.

Great leaders know their own strengths and weaknesses, and those of the leadership team members. They are liberal in their praise of others. They don't hog all the credit for school achievements. They make sure roles and responsibilities throughout the school are clear and understood by all the school staff. The leadership team is laser focused on measurable results, and they know how to rearrange people and processes to get people into the roles that allow them to shine. The leadership team stays together. Even when there are differences in opinions among team members on some important issue, policy or decision being made, they speak in unison outside the team, and don't speak ill about the decision, or about another team member. Staff see and believe that the school leadership team is dynamic and effective.

In summary, each of these ten management areas will be covered in more detail in our Orenda Charter Schools leadership training. Through various exercises, role play, and discussion we will uncover specific strategies our leaders should employ to move from being good, to great school leaders. I look forward to that training with each of you.