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## Essential Skills and Attitudes for Principals in Developing Countries

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## Essential skills and attitudes for principals in developing countries

**Tim Scott**

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**Many years ago, I was approached about teaching in a remote location in a developing country. As a young man, I was adventuresome and brave, so I accepted the job as the teacher and principal in a one-teacher school in the Mission Field. Now, nearly forty years later and with many more experiences in other schools and Missions, I would like to encourage those who might have a desire for adventure and excitement to consider teaching or administration in a developing area.**

There are many opportunities; the Adventist Volunteer Service website is a possible source of positions. (Volunteers are often given stipends so you don't have to be independently wealthy to take a job overseas) There may be positions available within your own area or state but if you feel that you have something to offer others in education, you want to be appreciated by students and parents, or you just want a change of scenery, consider the possibility of overseas work or a small school within your own area.

Administration is likely to be part of teaching overseas (or in small schools), especially when local staff may have limited education or experience. Foreigners are often considered experts in everything because they have seen more of the world and have likely experienced more educational opportunities as well as technology. The developing

world is fast catching up with technology, but in many countries, the foreigner is expected to have more skills and abilities than local workers.

The primary skill required for administration in a developing country is leadership. Leadership styles will likely change according to time and place, and develop with experience. Administrators usually lead based on their experiences when they were teachers and rarely will the theories learned in college courses or advice found in literature be cited as reasons for what they do (Dailey, 1983). Taking a leadership position in a developing country where the culture is usually significantly different to the home nation requires leaders to approach their tasks in new ways.

The easiest and most common mistake managers make about their leadership style is to assume that an effective style in one situation will be effective in another situation. (Dailey, 1983, p. 79)

What are some of the skills and attitudes necessary for working in such locations? Combining my experience as a teacher, vice-principal, principal, and education superintendent in both Africa and Asia with findings from literature, this article discussed the characteristics required by those working in an educational administration role in a developing country.

**Vision:** Administrators need to have vision in order to lead others. If a vision statement is not available, new administrators should develop one, along with a strategic plan, as a matter of priority. Innovative and visionary goals can be implemented and achieved with careful planning. In developing countries a vision of a school similar to one in the developed world may not be realistic. However, a vision of a school where the students grow in their relationship with the Lord is never unrealistic.

**Leadership style:** There are two key theories regarding workers and management. Theory X proposes that most workers feel negatively about work and thus will try to avoid it whenever possible. It is assumed that workers are not very intelligent, thus they can be easily lead. However, the manager must closely supervise them and they must be forced to do their work. The workers do not have any responsibility for making decisions because they

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[Photography:  
Tim Scott]

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want to be told what to do (McGregor, 1990a as cited by Kowalski, 2003).

On the other hand, Theory Y, states that negative ideas and feelings about work are due to the workers' past experiences. This theory argues that with proper motivation and rewards, most workers in an organisation can be highly committed to the organisation's objectives. The workers actually seek and will accept responsibility if the organisation's conditions are favourable towards this (McGregor, 1990b as cited by Kowalski, 2003).

Administrators, according to Theory X, are highly directive, autocratic and very task oriented. Whereas they are more flexible according to Theory Y as they try to balance work tasks with personnel relationships. Theory Y requires administrators to empower employees by giving them a degree of autonomy whilst achieving organisational goals (McGregor, 1990b as cited by Kowalski, 2003). In today's society and workplace, Theory Y is more conducive to the leadership of modern workers. However, according to the author's experiences and observations in both Africa and Asia, Theory X style of leadership remains both dominant and desired by most local personnel. Empowering local workers can be implemented gradually as one job of a missionary is to find someone local to be a future replacement.

**Instructional leader:** Within the school, the principal is perceived as the instructional leader. This role is likely to include tasks such as performance reviews, communication of new methods or strategies, mentoring, modelling, and staff professional development. The principal is the cheerleader and motivator: praising past efforts, recognising difficulties and problems, encouraging and inspiring teachers to achieve their utmost as the school year progresses.

Sharing expertise in teaching methodologies is always a positive aspect of a principal's role. In many developing countries, teachers have not learned to teach problem solving, logic or cooperative learning techniques.

**Decision maker:** To be an administrator is to be a decision maker. Making decisions is a skill that requires deliberation of the available information and alternatives, whilst recognising that the information is often incomplete. Due to conflicting interests both inside and outside the school, it is difficult to eliminate bias from the process. In some cases, leaders must be flexible when additional information is made available. Decisions seen as ethical and fair will usually have the support of both superiors and subordinates. Understanding the culture of others and not being dogmatic in solutions to problems is helpful for maintaining good relations. (Saying "this is the way we do it in my country!" is not a good tactic.)

**Listener:** The ability to listen to others is a valued skill in a leader. Effective organisational change and the building of consensus towards organisational goals can be achieved through shared decision-making. However, this calls for careful negotiation in cultures where leaders are expected to possess the knowledge and skills to make decisions and manage a successful initiative.

**Disciplinarian:** In many cases, the principal is responsible for dealing with the major discipline issues that occur within a school. Resolution usually requires face-to-face meetings where both verbal and non-verbal communication take place. It is essential that the principal be conscious of how culture, context, and use of 'jargon' are likely to impact on a given situation.

At times, the principal is required to respond to the inappropriate behaviour of employees. Ignoring improper conduct is often perceived by subordinates as condoning the action. Privately addressing the person/persons involved usually has a greater impact than making a general announcement or giving a public reprimand.

Time and schedules are often thought to be unimportant in many cultures. Giving gentle reminders and encouragement regarding promptness has lifted standards and brought improvement in schools where I have worked.

**Communicator:** Successful communication requires an understanding of cultural expectations. A leader may intentionally or unintentionally, send verbal or non-verbal messages that result in subordinates feeling defensive or criticised. A climate of mistrust may develop, rendering successful communication with employees near impossible in the future. An administrator, just as a teacher, who can show others that they love them and want them to improve and grow, will be appreciated and forgiven for most errors of culture.

Experienced principals are well acquainted

“*An administrator, just as a teacher, who can show others that they love them and want them to improve and grow, will be appreciated and forgiven for most errors of culture*”



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with the community. They utilise parent–teacher groups for advice and counsel. Businesses, law enforcement agencies and other educational institutions should also be consulted when necessary. Knowing how much is useful to be communicated and when the communication is best to take place are important.

**Technology user:** Computer skills in today's world are vital for administrators. However, in developing countries, subordinates may not have access to computers. The use of this technology may then be misunderstood or felt to be a way to keep subordinate workers restricted or controlled.

Providing opportunities for employees to gain technological skills maintains a positive atmosphere towards its use and benefits the subordinates.

**Delegator:** Administrators should not do work that is the responsibility of others. When asked to do tasks that are not part of their sphere, they need to be able to refuse with decisiveness and direct others to fulfil the responsibility.

Leaders must be visionary. Innovation and flexibility are required in order to achieve goals and fulfil the mission of the institution. In this role, administrators should seek continual growth and development both personally and professionally. The intrinsic rewards that are often cherished by those in teaching positions in developing countries are also available to administrators. **TEACH**

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