

# A Attitude and Ambiguity Tolerance

*You don't need experience if you've got attitude.*

—Scott Adams, creator  
*Dilbert* comic strip

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**I**t takes many different qualities, competencies, habits, and skills to be an effective leader in today's schools. This book is full of them. But it all starts with an attitude:

- Mike Hickey had it when he announced his retirement as superintendent of the Howard County (Maryland) Schools a full year in advance. When skeptics asked if he was worried about being a lame duck, Hickey replied, "No, because I'll be a lame duck with an attitude!" (You're a lame duck only if you allow yourself to limp along.)
- Carol Johnson, superintendent in Minneapolis, had an attitude when she turned down a hefty salary increase, insisting that the money go instead for underfinanced school programs.
- Owen Henson, principal in Topeka (Kansas), had an attitude when he waived traditional requirements so that a minority student could be the first member of his family to graduate from high school.
- Marvin Maire, superintendent in St. Louis Park (Minnesota), had an attitude when he was being hounded by a prominent citizen who demanded an inordinate amount of time, insisting, "I'm a taxpayer. You have to listen to me. I pay your salary." Finally, Maire handed the pest a

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dollar bill and said, “There’s your share of my salary. We’re even. Don’t bother me any more!”

- We’ve all heard of principals who showed an attitude when they allowed their students to shave their heads or drench them in a dunk tank after their school reached ambitious reading goals.

It’s true everywhere you look. The best school leaders have a little different attitude than most other people. But it’s not the attitude you may expect.

If you assume that great leaders have a larger-than-life ego, a bombastic demeanor, and a charismatic, cocky attitude, you’re way off the mark. As it turns out, lasting leaders have a lot less flamboyant attitude than some people think. There is a difference between a guiding light and a flash in the pan.

Think about the rise and fall of school leaders you have known. How many shooting stars have you watched burn out, never to be heard of again? How many gargantuan egos can you count that eventually became irrelevant as others grew weary of their overbearing attitude?

Great leaders—in schools, in businesses, anywhere—are sure of themselves without being full of themselves. They are self-confident without being self-centered. It’s the difference between a confident stride and a swagger. And it’s all a matter of attitude.

If you need convincing, check out the groundbreaking research of Jim Collins and his team of investigators who identified the distinguishing attitudes that set apart those business leaders whose companies achieve greatness (*From Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don’t*; see Resource 3).

Based on their findings, the leaders who build great organizations are more like “plow horses” than “show horses.” In the long run, a charismatic attitude is just about style. True leadership is all about substance.

According to Collins, outstanding business leaders (he calls them “Level 5” leaders) demonstrate an attitude of genuine personal humility, coupled with a strong professional will to get things done no matter what it takes. They may be modest about their own accomplishments, but they have an outspoken, absolute faith in the organization’s ability to prevail and an unswerving resolve to go to any limit to help their company get to the top and stay there.

Take another look around at your peers. Aren’t these the same attitudes found in the best administrators you know? Why should we be surprised that what works in business works in schools as well?

Level 5 leaders give others credit while channeling their personal ambition into achieving collective success. They are doggedly determined,

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realistic (willing to face hard facts), and terminally optimistic about the certainty of ultimate triumph.

As educators, we don't run a business, but I'm pretty sure we all want this same kind of leader for our schools. Because they get results. Because they don't just settle for good (average is overrated) when greatness is a possibility. And because they have the "right attitude."

Some of your colleagues may think that attitude isn't such a big deal. Just as some people still think the earth is flat. It doesn't matter. You know better.

The truth is that the kind of school leader you are or will ever become begins and ends with your attitude. The leader you want to be

- *Has a "can-do" attitude.* Confidence gives you courage and extends your reach. It allows you to take reasonable risks and do more than you thought possible.

- *Faces reality and expects others to do the same.* Effective leaders don't kid themselves. They deal with things the way they really are, not just the way they wish things were. This attitude gives others permission to get real and deny denial as well.

- *Demonstrates faith in people.* Without an attitude of trust, a principal or superintendent can be little more than a policeman constantly on the lookout for violators. ("If you want to get along with people to the best advantage, you must be able to see the good in them rather than the bad."—J. C. Penney)

- *Holds a positive view of the future.* Effective leaders are stubborn in their commitment to hope. ("I dwell in Possibility."—Emily Dickinson) Their realism keeps them from having a Pollyanna attitude, but they steadfastly believe that all obstacles can and will be overcome in the end. It is similar to the "survivor attitude" held by those who endured the holocaust.

- *Shows an open attitude toward change.* Level 5 leaders are willing to shake things up, raise the roof, and turn the organization upside down if necessary to get desired results.

- *Values honesty.* Effective leaders are authentic leaders. Anything less doesn't work, because kids, teachers, parents, and school-board members have a built-in radar for detecting phonies;

- *Reflects an attitude of unselfishness.* You can't be your best as a school leader until you learn to "de-center" yourself—accept that you are not the center of the universe, or even of your own school;

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- *Practices humility (without bragging about it).* Effective leaders promise answers and deliver answers, but they don't pretend to have all the answers.
- *Makes it clear that giving up is not an option.* Winston Churchill's "We'll never quit" attitude saved an entire nation in wartime. Just think what it can do for your school.
- *Shows a willingness to accept conflict as part of doing business in a public institution.* Real leaders don't back down from necessary confrontation and aren't afraid of a fight—and everyone knows it. ("Military history is full of generals who don't want to fight. They're called losers."—James Carville, political adviser to presidents)
- *Is passionate about the work and not afraid to show it.* More than anything else, strong emotion—a passion that won't let up—separates peak performers from also-rans. It's true in all organizations and especially true in schools.

To the very best administrators, being a principal or superintendent is more than a job. It is almost a calling. These are the leaders who care for and run their organization as if they owned it. They don't just work *in* the school, they constantly work *on* the school to make it better.

These are most of the distinguishing attitudes that characterize the kind of leaders everyone admires and remembers. But in schools, there is one more. Patience! It deserves separate billing and may well be the most important attitude of all.

School leaders everywhere work in a state of perpetual partial fulfillment. (More than leaders in business, industry, or the military where things get resolved quickly and everyone knows the results.) That's why no school administrator can succeed without a high level of "ambiguity tolerance"—the ability to live with unsolved problems. You and I call it plain, old-fashioned patience.

Scientists frequently talk about "Brownian motion," the irregular movement of microscopic particles suspended in fluid. These particles zig, zag, dip, dive, and constantly move in a random, erratic, patternless manner. That's the way things often happen in schools, too.

The unknown author who wrote the following could have been thinking about your school (or any school):

*The world is inundated with disruption; unforeseen dangers; unanticipated opportunities; unmet expectations; alarming new statistics; startling twists of fate; shocking innovations; unheralded improvements; unrealistic requirements; overwhelming demands; contradictory*

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*directions; staggering liabilities; astonishing results; sudden strokes of luck; and more.*

Sound familiar? It should. It takes an attitude of extreme patience to remain creative and productive in the environment of chronic chaos called school

Closure comes slowly (if at all) to educators, because outcomes are difficult to measure, results are not known for years (if ever), and problems constantly recycle themselves. How many times have you dealt with the same issues over and over again?

Cynics say education just goes around and around in circles. The faithful choose to believe that we simply make progress along an upward spiral.

Either way, if you are going to make it as a school leader, you have to accept ambiguity as the norm, learn to thrive on it, and continually create your own clarity. With the right attitude, a little ambiguity can even be a good thing.

Look over the discussion of Level 5 attitudes one more time. Whenever you find this combination of attitudes in any leader, you've got a keeper. Fortunately, there are many such leaders in our schools today. More than most people realize. You know some of them. You may even be one of them. If not, you can be.

When it comes to leadership, attitudes make all the difference between success or failure, whether you are running a giant corporation or an elementary school. After all, you are your attitudes. They set you apart and help define who you are, what you stand for, how you treat people, and how you get things done. They are the engines that drive your actions.

More important, attitudes are contagious. Everyone in the school (students, staff members, and others) take their cue from the top. As the leader, your attitude either nourishes the organization or poisons it.

Never underestimate the power of your attitudes. If you have any lingering doubts about its importance or don't want to accept this author's word for it alone, read what others have to say:

*For success, attitude is equally as important as ability.*

—Harry F. Banks

*Nothing can stop the man with the right attitude from reaching his goal, nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong attitude.*

—W. W. Ziege

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*Attitude is more important than aptitude.*

—William James

*There is very little difference in people. But that little difference makes a big difference. The little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative.*

—Clement Stone

*Attitude is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than what people do or say. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skills.*

—Charles Swindoll

Enough said. Point made. Case closed.

It's conclusive. Attitudes count. But are they enough? Of course not. Otherwise, this book would end right here. Attitudes are meaningful only if they are acted upon. Anyone can talk the right attitudes, but without follow-through, they are only meaningless clichés and empty promises.

The real “good-to-great” leaders in schools, businesses, or anywhere else actually live their attitudes. It is the only way to establish credibility and model their expectations for the organization.

If you wonder how this works in the real world, here are a dozen examples of attention-grabbing actions that reflect the positive attitudes of the school's leader. (Unlike much of what you see on reality TV, it's OK to try these at home.)

1. Establish an open-door, “no-appointment time” before and after school. (Accessibility is an attitude in itself.)

2. Give everyone on staff their own business cards—including clerks, custodians, and bus drivers. It's another way to honor everyone's importance to the organization.

3. Shrink the school's policy manual and make life easier for everyone. In the business world, Nordstrom gets by with just two simple employee policies: Rule #1—Use your good judgment in all situations; and Rule #2—There will be no additional rules. Surely, a mere department store isn't better run than your school.

4. Take out the chairs and hold stand-up faculty meetings. It shortens meeting time, limits posturing and pontificating, and shows respect for everyone's time.

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5. Encourage staff members to “blow the whistle” on colleagues for doing a good deed. Then highlight these random acts of kindness on a special bulletin board in the faculty lounge.

6. Hold autopsies, postmortems, and formal funerals for bad ideas tried and failed. (Cam-Corp Industries has used a Screw-Up Box, so that no foul-up goes unnoticed.)

7. Invite selected business and civic leaders to be “Principal for a Day” in your school. There’s no better way to demonstrate openness and give important community members an eye-opening idea of what real live principals do every day. It works for the St. Paul (Minnesota) Schools and it can work for you as well.

8. Even in periods of retrenchment, allocate a little money to fund “enhancements” (limited improvements or new programs or services). Especially in dark times, people need to know that the leader is confident for the long haul. No school is ever too poor to invest in getting better.

9. Require teachers and other staff members to bring back and try at least one “crazy idea” from each conference or convention they attend.

10. Start writing “Asking Memos” instead of just “Telling Memos.” Confident leaders are never too proud to ask for help and opinions from others.

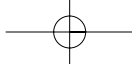
11. Make it a point to celebrate successes—great or small. Some companies shoot off a cannon. Ringing a bell might be more appropriate for a school.

12. Introduce a “Pay It Forward” week in your school (inspired by the movie of the same name) when students do good deeds for others in advance, instead of waiting to pay back when nice things are done for them.

Of course, you don’t have to like any of these suggestions. You can come up with your own. Just follow your attitudes and see where they take you. The bottom line is that your attitudes are your filters for screening behavior options.

If you are not the school leader you want to be or if things aren’t going right in your career, look first to your attitude. It’s never too late to conduct your own “Attitude Audit.”

Don’t let a bad attitude get in the way of your success. Bad attitudes lead to bad choices whose negative consequences only give you a bad attitude. It’s a cycle of self-imposed frustration and failure. It doesn’t have to be that way.



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The great thing about attitudes is that you can change them. (“The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitude of mind.”—William James)

Your attitudes are not like DNA. They are not permanently imprinted. You can choose your attitudes and make them work for you instead of against you.

There are lots of factors that make up an effective leader in today’s schools. But attitudes come first.

If you don’t get anything else out of this section, remember this: There is no good leader with a bad attitude!

