



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Serving Students Through Values-Guided Leadership

We must learn to distinguish between what is “merely important” and what is “wildly important.”

— Steven Covey

There’s an old saying that “if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” It is no easy matter, however, for school leaders to stand for their most important principles given the demands and pace of their challenging responsibilities. But each day, district administrators, principals, and teacher leaders face critically important value-driven decisions regarding resource allocation, curriculum, pedagogy, and the quality of relationships they want for students and adults.

Leaders who make a positive difference in the lives of youngsters consistently represent a set of values that guide what they think, say, and do. Because taking such stands sometimes puts leaders at risk of criticism, ostracism, or even more dire consequences, awareness of the values that guide them can inspire courage in the face of their fears. Experience has taught me that leaders who are clear about their most important and enduring values are more likely to summon the courage to speak their truth in settings where it will most make a difference. Leaders’ clarity and courage often determine whether schools truly serve their students and broader communities.

The nature of their work provides many opportunities for leaders to link their values to educational issues. Faculty and committee meetings, community events, and one-to-one conversations with teachers, students, and parents are primary venues in which leaders can explain the principles that guide their work and engage in dialogue about them.

Because leaders often must react quickly to the events that press upon them, it is critically important they make time for periods of solitary contemplation to reflect on what’s important and how it can be realized in their work and personal lives. The wisdom of our inner voice can only be revealed during these still and quiet periods. In addition, time spent writing or with a committed listener reflecting on the link between our values and upcoming decisions is also important. ([Chapter 10](#) of *Leading for Results* expands on this point.) Many leaders also find that reading biographies and history helps connect them to important and enduring values and inspires courage.

“To act with integrity, we must first know who we are,” James Kouzes and Barry Posner write in *The Leadership Challenge*. When leaders interact with others in the spirit of mutual respect with a deep understanding of the values that guide their lives, they lead through learning.

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