Consultant Perceptions of Skills that School Boards Value in Superintendent Applicants[*]

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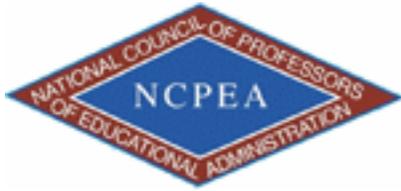
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1 Introduction

The superintendency is one of the most demanding positions in the public school system. No other administrative position in a school district possesses as much power and visibility as the superintendent (Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1998). Multi-year contracts, higher salaries, and state mandates that prohibit reassignment provide proof of the uniqueness of the position (Hickey, Dees, & Marshall, 2007). Legal statutes that confront superintendents have increased over the past decade. What in the past have been considered traditional methods of education are under examination, and a sharp increase in accountability, as measured by student performance, is evident (Glass, 2000). The knowledge and skills needed to perform superintendent duties have significantly changed over the years (Brunner & Bjork, 2001; Fusarelli & Peterson, 2002; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Houston 2001).

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As the central figurehead of the district, the superintendent's day-to-day actions impact the overall district performance. The leadership style of superintendents today appears to require a broad range of skills, both technical and psychological. One way to understand the characteristics that help individuals obtain this leadership position is by examining the characteristics of Texas public school superintendents as viewed by the search consultants that hire them.

School boards are faced with the tough decision of what qualities to search for when hiring a new superintendent. In many cases, school boards will employ a search consultant to guide them through the superintendent hiring process. The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions of superintendent search consultants as they relate to the selection of superintendent candidates. The synergistic leadership theory (SLT) developed by Irby, Brown, Duffy and Trautman (2002) provided the theoretical framework needed to analyze the characteristics search consultants perceive school boards desire in superintendent candidates. The SLT includes the measurement of leadership and management behavior, external forces that impact leadership, organizational characteristics, and attitudes, values and beliefs.

2 Method

2.1 Target Population

The target population consisted of superintendent search consultants in Texas. There is no directory for consultants, so a list was collected through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling involves asking well-known individuals within a particular field for recommendations, thus increasing the number of participants in the sample (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2008). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) stated that participants in a snowball sample are often highly credible. The sampling began by recording and contacting consultants listed on TexasISD.com (a popular website used by school officials to keep up with current events as they pertain to education), and the Texas Association of School Administrators website (www.tasanet.org). Additionally, all 20 educational service centers (ESC) in Texas were contacted for possible consultants. The snowball sampling took place over a six-month period. At the conclusion of the snowball sampling, 108 superintendent search consultants were identified. Each consultant in the identified population was given an opportunity to respond to the inventory. There were 61 responses, resulting in a 56.5% rate of return.

2.2 Instrument

The instrument sent to consultants was a modified version of the Organizational and Leadership Effectiveness Inventory (OLEI) (Irby, et al., 2002). Two changes were made to the original OLEI for the study. First, the directions in each section were altered to address superintendent search consultants, who were the sample population. Second, there were some open-ended questions regarding consultant perceptions added to the survey. This manuscript addresses the OLEI but not the open-ended questions. The responses to the open-ended questions will be reported in a separate manuscript.

The reliability of the OLEI was originally established by Trautman (2000), added to by Holtkamp (2001) and later re-substantiated in companion studies by Hernandez (2004) and Truslow (2004). A Cronbach's reliability analysis was employed to establish reliability of the original OLEI yielding an alpha of .9045 for internal consistency (Holtkamp, 2001). Reliability was further substantiated after data collection by conducting a Cronbach's reliability analysis for the sample population of superintendent search consultants. This analysis yielded an alpha of .986 for internal consistency.

3 Results

The results of this study analyzed superintendent search consultant perspectives of traits that school boards valued in superintendent applicants. The survey analyzed various behaviors to determine those that were considered important for an applicant to possess.

Leadership behavior. The synergistic leadership theory (SLT) developed by Irby, Brown, Duffy and Trautman (2002) utilizes a systems theory approach. The SLT is relational and consists of four interrelated

forces: (a) leadership behavior, (b) organizational structure, (c) external forces, and (d) attitudes, beliefs, and values.

Ranging from autocratic to nurturer, leadership behaviors have been associated with both male and female leaders (Hernandez, 2004; Irby, Brown, Duffy, & Trautman, 2002). Collaborating, nurturing, stabilizing, interdependence and good communicating have been leadership behaviors typically associated with female leaders (Irby, Brown, & Trautman, 2000), while being task-oriented, controlling, independent, and assertive have been leadership behaviors typically associated with males (Brunner, 1995; Holtkamp, 2001; Truslow, 2004).

Incorporated into the SLT are ten leadership behaviors: bureaucratic leadership, humanistic leadership, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, power to leadership, value-added leadership, interactive leadership, caring leadership, principle-centered leadership, and feminist leadership (Hernandez, 2004; Holtkamp, 2001; Truslow, 2004). Further research conducted by Schlosberg (2003) included servant leadership in the SLT.

Table 1 provides a numerical representation in percentages of the total responses for each of the 30 items under the Leadership Management Behavior componenet of OLEI.

	Percentages			
Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Leads by example	6.6	00.0	14.8	78.7
2. Ability to "juggle"	3.3	09.8	60.7	26.2
3. Communicator	6.6	03.3	08.2	82.0
4. Lifelong Learner	3.3	19.7	49.2	27.9
5. High expectations for self and others	4.9	04.9	23.0	67.2
				continued on next page

6. Strong academic self-concept	1.6	11.5	52.5	34.4
7. Motivational	4.9	04.9	24.6	65.6
8. Communicates vision	4.9	01.6	23.0	70.5
9. "Can do" philosophy (resourceful)	4.9	01.6	24.6	68.9
10. Persistent	3.3	13.1	42.6	41.0
11. Shares power	0.0	16.4	57.4	26.2
12. Dependable	6.6	00.0	16.4	77.0
13. Efficient	3.3	06.6	32.8	57.4
14. Assertive	4.9	08.2	54.1	32.8
15. Delegates	1.6	13.1	50.8	34.4
16. Utilizes participatory management	1.6	14.8	52.5	31.1
continued on next page				

17. Decision maker	6.6	00.0	26.2	67.2
18. Risk taker	1.6	13.1	60.7	24.6
19. Task oriented	0.0	13.1	49.2	37.7
20. Change agent	1.6	14.8	50.8	32.8
21. Influencer	4.9	04.9	41.0	49.2
22. Analyzes situations	4.9	01.6	29.5	63.9
23. High energy	6.6	03.3	32.8	57.4
24. Achievement oriented	6.6	01.6	24.6	67.2
25. Emotionally stable	6.6	01.6	14.8	77.0
26. Self sufficient	3.3	11.5	41.0	44.3
27. Effective time manager	3.3	08.2	37.7	50.8

28. Organized	6.6	04.9	24.6	63.9
29. Persuasive	8.2	01.6	32.8	57.4
30. Effective	8.2	00.0	11.5	80.3

Table 1: Leadership Management Behavior as a Factor in Superintendent Applicant Desirability Among Schools Boards as Perceived by Superintendent Search Consultants

Table 2 provides a numerical representation in percentages of the total responses for each of the 24 items under the Leadership Behavior, Interpersonal Behavior of the SLT.

	Percentages			
Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
31. Cooperative	1.6	06.6	37.7	54.1
32. Empathetic	1.6	16.4	54.1	27.9
33. People oriented	4.9	03.3	19.7	72.1
34. Compassionate	0.0	13.1	62.3	24.6
35. Collegial	3.3	04.9	62.3	29.5
				continued on next page

36. Team player	0.0	11.5	23.0	65.6
37. Strong interpersonal skills	6.6	00.0	23.0	70.5
38. Consensus builder	4.9	01.6	27.9	65.6
39. Empowers others	3.3	11.5	47.5	37.7
40. Networker	1.6	16.4	65.6	16.4
41. Transformational	0.0	18.0	65.6	16.4
42. Combines social talk with administrator talk	0.0	26.2	54.1	19.7
43. Uses affiliate language, such as "we," "our"	6.6	09.8	54.1	29.5
44. Participative	1.6	06.6	54.1	37.7
45. Inclusive	1.6	11.5	47.5	39.3
			continued on next page	

46. Nurturing	1.6	24.6	49.2	24.6
47. Democratic	0.0	14.8	65.6	19.7
48. Intuitive	1.6	18.0	45.9	34.4
49. Flexible/adaptable	4.9	00.0	44.3	50.8
50. Emotionally expressive	4.9	26.2	45.9	23.0
51. Receptive to new ideas/change	3.3	04.9	49.2	42.6
52. Alert to social environment	1.6	08.2	41.0	49.2
53. Responsive to needs of faculty/staff	6.6	01.6	29.5	62.3
54. Reflective	0.0	23.0	52.5	24.6

Table 2: Leadership Behavior/ Interpersonal Behavior as a Factor in Superintendent Applicant Desirability Among Schools Boards as Perceived by Superintendent Search Consultants

External forces. Influences outside of the organization over which the leader has no control are referred to as external forces. Local, state, national community and conditions, government regulations, demographics, cultural climate, economic situations, geography, political climate, and family conditions are all examples of external forces (Irby, Brown, Duffy & Trautman, 2002). The synergistic leadership theory considers the impact of these external forces on an organization's practices, decisions, decision-making processes, leadership, structure, and attitudes of and toward employees.

Seventeen items were used to describe the various external forces that can influence organizational practices, the decision making process as well as the decisions, the leadership, the structure of the organization, and the attitudes of the employees as well as the attitudes toward employees. Respondents were asked to what extent they believed school boards agreed with the importance of the items of external forces.

Table 3 provides a numerical representation in percentages of the total responses for each of the 17 items under External Forces of the SLT.

	Percentages			
Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
55. Emphasis on collegiality	0.0	13.1	68.9	18.0
56. Views teachers as leaders	1.6	27.9	50.8	19.7
57. Emphasis on reflective practice	0.0	34.4	49.2	16.4
58. Participative decision making	1.6	13.1	59.0	26.2
59. Utilizes system of rotating leadership	9.8	42.6	39.3	8.2
60. Recognizes ability or expertise	4.9	04.9	49.2	41.0

61. Arrives at goals through consensual process	1.6	14.8	47.5	36.1
62. Values faculty/staff as individual human beings	1.6	08.2	47.5	42.6
63. Commitment to employee growth	0.0	09.8	50.8	39.3
64. Power sharing	3.3	29.5	54.1	13.1
65. Promotes community and cooperation	4.9	03.3	29.5	62.3
66. Promotes nurturing and caring	3.3	19.7	60.7	16.4
67. Promotes subordinate empowerment	0.0	24.6	52.5	23.0
				continued on next page

68. School board supports their philosophy	4.9	03.3	37.7	54.1
69. Their leadership is affected by the expectations of the community	4.9	04.9	41.0	49.2
70. The socio-economic levels in the community affect their leadership	3.3	19.7	39.3	37.3
71. Language groups in the community impact their leadership	3.3	14.8	52.5	29.5

Table 3: External Forces as a Factor in Superintendent Applicant Desirability Among Schools Boards as Perceived by Superintendent Search Consultants

Organizational structure. Organizational structure involves the design of the organization and how it operates. Organizational structure also dictates the way human resources are structured for highest performance and the way the parts are divided and related to each other (Merron, 1995). The interaction of these parts influences the organizational structure. Purposes, participants, acquisition and allocation of resources to accomplish goals, structural forms to divide and coordinate activities, and reliance on certain members to lead and manage others are the basic elements of organizations (Shafritz & Ott, 2001).

Behaviors, the flow and type of communication, and the relationships among its members are influenced by the structure of the organization. There is interplay of structures and people, as each helps to shape the other (Bjork, 2001). Structures, practices, norms, and beliefs are institutionalized and mutually reinforced as organizations evolve over time. For example, belief systems shape the behaviors of the members while also providing an established pattern of behavior for new members. Thus, organizational structures and belief systems are not only interrelated but build upon and influence the each other (Bjork, 2001).

Data from the third factor of the OLEI, organizational structure, were analyzed next. The 12 items of this factor required the respondent to make judgments regarding the importance of how the organizational leader reacts to various items in the structure of the organization.

Table 4 provides a numerical representation in percentages of the total responses for each of the 12 items under Organizational Structure of the SLT.

Item	Percentages			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
72. Utilizes system of rotating leadership	9.8	42.6	34.4	13.1
73. Recognizes ability or expertise	3.3	04.9	52.5	39.3
74. Arrives at goals through consensual process	1.6	18.0	50.8	29.5
75. Values faculty/staff as individual human beings	1.6	06.6	57.4	34.4
76. Commitment to employee growth	0.0	19.7	45.9	34.4
				continued on next page

77. Power shar-ing	0.0	34.4	47.5	18.0
78. Promotes commu-nity and cooperation	4.9	03.3	32.8	59.0
79. Promotes nurturing and caring	1.6	21.3	59.0	18.0
80. Promotes subordinate empower-ment	0.0	23.0	55.7	21.3
81. Has clear norms and values	6.6	03.3	37.7	52.5
82. Encourages professional training	1.6	13.1	45.9	39.3
83. Has well-defined goals	6.6	01.6	29.5	62.3

Table 4: Organizational Structure as a Factor in Superintendent Applicant Desirability Among Schools Boards as Perceived by Superintendent Search Consultants

Beliefs, attitudes, and values. The foundation for principles that surface in the form of values, norms, ideas, and teachings is based on attitudes, beliefs, and values (Covey, 1992; Hernandez, 2004; Irby, Brown, Duffy & Trautman, 2002). Beliefs may change as new information is acquired, but attitudes and values remain constant. Values and beliefs serve as the foundation for an organization's culture and core ideology (Collins & Porras, 1994; Krotter & Cohen, 2002).

Table 5 provides a breakdown of responses for each of the eight items under values, attitudes and beliefs of superintendent candidates.

	Percentages			
Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
84. Emphasis on professional growth for self/staff/faculty	3.3	04.9	55.7	36.1
85. Openness to change	0.0	09.8	60.7	29.5
86. Emphasis on collegiality	1.6	11.5	60.7	26.2
87. Emphasis on character, ethics, and integrity	6.6	00.0	14.8	78.7
88. Emphasis on programs for special students	3.3	11.5	63.9	21.3
89. Emphasis on innovation	0.0	13.1	60.7	26.2
90. Emphasis on reflective practice	0.0	27.9	47.5	24.6
				continued on next page

91. Openness to diversity	3.3	01.6	39.3	55.7

Table 5: Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs as a Factor in Superintendent Applicant Desirability Among Schools Boards as Perceived by Superintendent Search Consultants

Five additional items were analyzed in order to determine search consultants' perceptions of the values, attitudes, and beliefs of school boards. Table 6 provides a breakdown of responses for each of the five items under values, attitudes and beliefs of school boards.

	Percentages			
Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
92. Emphasis of professional growth for self/staff/faculty	1.6	16.4	49.2	32.8
93. Emphasis on innovation	1.6	21.3	54.1	23.0
94. Importance of programs for special students	3.3	14.8	60.7	21.3
95. Openness to change	3.3	13.1	59.0	24.6
96. Openness to diversity	1.6	11.5	44.3	42.6

Table 6: Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs of School Board Members as Perceived by Superintendent Search Consultants

The data that resulted from the OLEI completed from 61 superintendent search consultants suggests traits that school boards find valuable according to the individuals who are paid to assist them in finding district leaders. The findings section further analyzes the data, which may be used in interview preparation, or general superintendent applicant development.

4 Findings

Management traits were analyzed from the first 30 questions of the survey. Few of these traits were considered unimportant to schools boards, but several stood out. The top ten most important management applicant traits listed as "strongly agree" on the survey as perceived by superintendent search consultants were as follows:

1. Communicator
2. Effective
3. Leads by example
4. Dependable
5. Emotionally stable
6. Communicates vision
7. "Can do" philosophy (resourceful)
8. Decision maker
9. Achievement oriented
10. High expectations of self and others

The ten most important interpersonal traits (as determined by the highest percentage of "strongly agree" on the survey) perceived by consultants for an applicant to possess are as follows:

1. People oriented
2. Strong interpersonal skills
3. Consensus builder
4. Team player
5. Responsive to needs of faculty/staff
6. Cooperative
7. Flexible/adaptive
8. Alert to social environment
9. Receptive to new ideas/change
10. Inclusive

These traits interrelate, and the top response in the management survey section, "communicator", permeates perceived needs in both sections. As a leader, the interpersonal projection is important, and both sections of this study suggest that consultants believe school board members focus upon these areas in the hiring process. The management responses may relate to one's personal strengths, but to the extent that they affect the external world.

   The least important traits, as measured by the combined percentage of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" in the survey, included the following in the management section:

1. Lifelong learner
2. Persistent
3. Utilizes participatory management
4. Change agent
5. Shares power
6. Self sufficient
7. Risk taker
8. Delegates
9. Assertive
10. Ability to "juggle"

The least important traits for the interpersonal behavior section of the survey included the following:

1. Emotionally expressive
2. Nurturing
3. Combines social talk with administrator talk
4. Reflective
5. Intuitive
6. Networker
7. Empathetic
8. Transformational
9. Uses affiliate language, such as "we", "our"
10. Empower others

The highest percentage that combined "disagree" and "strongly disagree" was the perception of the need to be emotionally expressive, and it was only 31.1%; thus, 68.9% of consultants perceived a level of importance in this area. These areas are simply perceived as less important that others.

The top issues according to the survey portion on external factors included the following:

1. Promotes community and cooperation
2. School board supports their philosophy
3. Their leadership is affected by the expectations of the community
4. Recognizes ability or expertise
5. Values faculty/staff as individual human beings

These issues reinforce the idea of superintendent applicants being individuals who are capable of developing relationships with a diverse group of district stakeholders. The least important external forces were as follows:

1. Utilizes a system of rotating leadership
2. Emphasis on reflective practice
3. Power sharing
4. Views teachers as leaders
5. Promotes subordinate empowerment

These forces that were considered less important tend to revolve around decentralized empowerment, and although a case could be made for the importance of this in a district, consultants do not perceive this to be a major barrier for applicants.

The result of the organizational structure portion of the survey supports the external forces results. Consultants listed the top five applicant traits for organizational structure as follows:

1. Has well-defined goals
2. Promotes community and cooperation
3. Recognizes ability or expertise
4. Values faculty/staff as individual human beings
5. Has clear norms and values

Along with the human touch, an applicant should be clear as to their goals and values in addressing the school board. The least important organizational traits according to the survey were the following:

1. Utilizes system of rotating leadership
2. Power sharing
3. Promotes subordinate empowerment
4. Promotes nurturing and caring
5. Arrives at goals through consensual process

Applicants should be clear regarding goals, and according to consultants, this is more important than creating a shared environment.

Values, attitudes, and beliefs that consultants said were important included *openness to diversity, emphasis on character, ethics, and integrity, emphasis on professional growth for self/staff/faculty, and openness to change*. This suggests a need for strong character to a desire to continually improve professionally. The least important values, attitudes and beliefs was an *emphasis on reflective practice*, a trait that did not resonate with consultants throughout the survey.

Values, attitudes and beliefs of consultant perceptions of school board members included *openness to diversity, openness to change, and emphasis on professional growth*. The least important factor was *emphasis on innovation*. The perceptions on school board members were similar to those of superintendent applicants. People like others that are like themselves, and this seems to be true according to this survey. The differences were slight and similarities common.

5 Implications

The findings of this study have implications for the preparation of superintendents by institutions of higher education, for individuals seeking a superintendent's position and for the school boards that are searching for a superintendent. Frequently, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and abilities are not addressed in the formal preparation of superintendents and many superintendent candidates and school boards are not aware of the significance of these skills in securing and succeeding as a superintendent.

In most states, the superintendent certification is the penultimate certification available and is accomplished in conjunction with a doctoral degree or as a stand-alone certification. States identify competencies or courses that comprise the certification requirements. Frequently these courses address the primary functions that the superintendent performs such as school finance, facilities, human resources, etc. Most of the coursework comprises the technical skills necessary in these areas. A question that should be addressed by university preparation programs is can the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and abilities be taught explicitly as part of the superintendent's university program.

Frequently, individuals seeking a superintendent position are serving in an administrative capacity as a principal, central administrator or superintendent. Educational leaders draw from a number of power bases as they perform their duties. Two of the power bases they utilize are expertise and referent power. Expertise is the power of knowledge and referent is the power of human relations or interpersonal skills. As this study indicates superintendent candidates need to be cognizant that as they move up the administrative hierarchy the technical skills may change but the need for strong interpersonal are a constant and a prerequisite for obtaining a position as a superintendent

For school boards, the goal is to hire a superintendent who possesses the skills to be successful as the chief executive officer. The superintendent must possess conceptual, technical, and human relations skills. The conceptual skills deal with the higher level thinking skills required for the position such as planning, decision-making and problem solving. The technical skills are the ability to engage in the various functions of the position. The human relations skills are the ability to interact effectively with constituents. As indicated by the research conducted in this study school boards place a great deal of importance in the selection process on the perceived human relations skills of the candidate.

The importance of this research is the greater understanding of consultant perceptions of traits that school boards find important. Institutions of higher education, superintendent candidates, and school boards can use the information identified in this study in preparing and securing individuals who will succeed as school superintendents.

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