

Principal Agency

Mark Shellinger, Director

National SAM Innovation Project

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In our work across the country with school leaders, we push hard on principal intentionality, but frequently hear leaders insist they don't have the authority, or power, to act. When I started in school leadership, I assumed I had the power to make decisions to protect teaching time, practice and student learning.

I remember a district maintenance director coming to my school with a contractor at 9:30 AM wanting to do routine work on the fire alarm system. I said no. They were not going to interrupt the teaching of 800 students unless there was a safety concern. I told them they could come back at 4:00 PM, after dismissal, or do the work on a weekend. The district director told me the contractor's time was valuable and I had to do what he said. I asked him how the cost of his time compared to what we were spending per hour teaching students in my school. He told me that the superintendent wanted this done, now. I told him I would need a directive from my supervisor, or the superintendent, that the contractor's time was to be valued more than the teaching and learning of 800 students. What happened? The contractor came back at 4:00 PM. I never heard from anyone at the district office until months later when the superintendent told the story in a principal's meeting in a complimentary way.

A principal we work with recently interrupted her entire school via the public address system when a parent reported a car had its lights on in the parking lot. When I asked why, she explained that she had been told to satisfy parent requests. When I asked her if she had considered that the PA announcement would interrupt instruction, she looked at me blankly, and said: "I would not want to get in trouble by saying no."

Kim Marshall, leadership coach and author of the weekly Marshall Memo says: "Too many principals see themselves as middle managers and are treated that way. Your story about standing up to the superintendent on the alarm company is a classic - and the superintendent "got it." I had exactly the same mindset as yours when I was principal. One of the first things I did was forbid all-call intercom announcements. I tell the story of Japanese educators, when visiting U.S. schools, expressing shock at a PA announcement interrupting instruction. In their heart of hearts, superintendents and school board members don't want their school leaders to be sheep."

Agency requires a certain amount of risk taking. Perhaps principals have lost agency and have become middle managers. Perhaps we have been selecting risk-adverse people to be leaders. Perhaps principal preparation programs, and on the job professional development, have not provided training on how to have agency successfully.

In a 2007 study, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) found a troubling gap between the power that school leaders need to get the job done, over budget, instruction, and hiring, firing, and transferring teachers) and the constraints under which most of them operate. Additionally, they found most principals are resigned to this autonomy gap and don't push for the power they know they need. They've learned to work within the system, seeking to do the best they can as middle managers rather than as real agents of change.

Martin Hewson, York University, Centre for International and Security Studies, identifies three properties of human beings that give rise to agency: intentionality, power, and rationality.

Principal Agency is when a leader acts with intentionality, on their own, and believes they have the power, rationality, or responsibility, to do so.

Principals with agency act with **intention**, are goal oriented and accept the risk in acting. They understand resources and district culture, create limits, but focus on **what is possible** rather than accepting limits they see as barriers.

Agentic Leadership

Agentic leadership derives from the term agency. This leadership style is generally described in the business field as a person who is respected by subordinates, demonstrates assertiveness, competitiveness, independence, courageousness, and is masterful in achieving their task at hand. (Kulich, Iacoviello, Iacoviello, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2017) *University of Geneva*

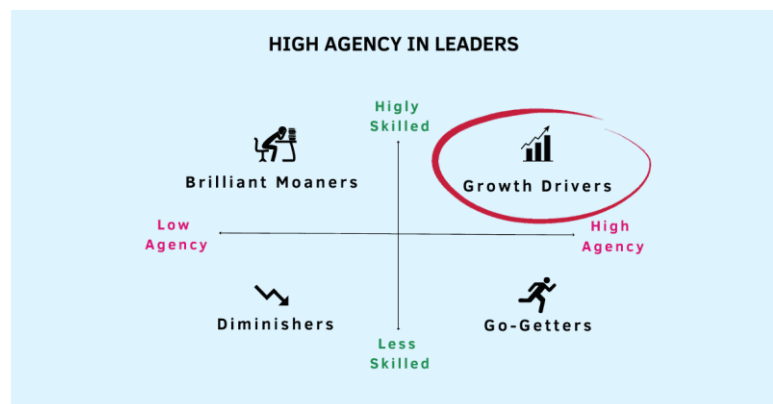
Agentic leadership emphasizes an individual's self-efficacy, assertiveness, and ability to take charge in directing others towards achieving common goals. Key traits of agentic leaders include *proactivity, adaptability, and a goal-oriented mindset*. These leaders believe in their own abilities to accomplish tasks, effectively communicate with their team members, and navigate uncertain situations. By making informed decisions and empowering their team members to

take ownership of their work, agentic leaders foster a collaborative and high-performing environment that aligns individual, team, and organizational objectives.

Communications coach Jennifer Kammeyer describes communal leadership as the ability to pull the best from everyone and to generate new ideas, build relationships and foster community. She describes Agentic leadership as the ability to drive toward a goal taking the risks and demanding the standards to reach excellence. She believes leaders need both leadership styles, *Agentic and Communal*, to be effective.

When you're told that something is impossible, is that the end of the conversation, or does that start a second dialogue in your mind, how to get around whoever it is that's just told you that you can't do something?

- ERIC WEINSTEIN



Eric Weinstein, American economist and mathematician

Vinita Bansal, business leadership author and TechTello website owner, details the differences between High and Low Agency leaders:

High Agency Leaders:

- Work on self instead of worrying about the conditions, thereby influencing the conditions in which they operate.
- Do not let life happen to them, but feel more in command of their lives.
- Take radical responsibility by evaluating the situation, considering different options and making a choice.
- Turn obstacles into opportunities.

- Put their time and energy into gathering resources and creating possibilities.

Low Agency leaders:

- Rely on blames and excuses to justify their outcomes, spiral in despair when faced with challenges and setbacks and feel paralyzed when required to make tough decisions.
- Turn into passive observers accepting the story given to them by others without questioning it. The attitude to abdicate responsibility and push blame on others creates a toxic spiral of negativity which leads to avoidance and inaction.
- Instead of making plans to find a solution, they let problems fester, spending time constantly worrying about things not getting done. They assume that they have no support, thereby believing their own self-defeating stories and feeling exhausted when they absolutely see no sign of progress in their work and their lives.
- When it's time to make a decision, they may procrastinate, obsess over minor details, or worry excessively about the outcome. Lack of confidence and being risk-averse impacts their thinking and makes them either outsource their decision making to others or delay it.

Principals Have Lost Power and Authority

“Under the current system, educational leaders have all of the responsibility but none of the power. Allowing principals to act like CEOs may foster a more efficient

system.” Chester E. Finn Jr., a former assistant secretary of education under President Ronald Reagan; senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution

Whether by intention or not, school districts have taken authority to act from principals over the last four decades. Decisions that were once, primarily, the school leader’s, have moved to district level administrators, or have been given up to employee groups through contract negotiations.

Hiring staff, selecting assistant principals, setting work hours, setting school schedules and fiscal/budget decisions, all areas of responsibility and control for a principal in the not-so-distant past, are seldom controlled by school level leaders today.

Lack of formal authority, or power, reduces, but does not necessarily remove, agency. For example, many districts have taken control over the selection and placement of assistant principals, a decision that was primarily the principal’s. The authority, or power, of the principal, in this case, is diminished, but agency is not necessarily removed, as agency has three elements: power, rationality, responsibility. The principal can elect to accept, or, push back on an appointment based on rationality and responsibility, as well as the amount of risk the leader is willing to accept. This may, in fact, increase the leader’s power.

As a first-year principal I elected to push back when a supervisor directed me to share our full-time nurse with another school. When I pointed out that three other schools with full-time nurses each had significantly smaller student enrollments than mine, and pressed that he should have them provide the nursing service, he laughed, and said: “I picked you because you are new. I thought you’d just give in.”

Principals can still have high agency, without formal authority or power, if they are willing to take a risk, given the proper support from district leaders, and/or benefit from effective training in principal preparation and development programs.

What principals *can’t do* does not have to stop principals from *doing what they can*.

Please give Mark feedback on this draft article. Please feel free to share your own experiences and anecdotes. Mark@SamsConnect.com