An institution cannot create meaningful change without genuinely involving the people who are closest to implementation. Principals should not merely be expected to execute decisions made elsewhere. They should be part of the decision-making process itself. Their experience matters. Their observations matter. Their understanding of teachers matters. Their knowledge of what is possible within the school matters.

And there is another simple but powerful ingredient: being heard. Sometimes people do not need recognition as much as they need trust. They need to know that their judgement is respected. They need to feel that after years of experience and contribution, their perspective has value.

We speak extensively about student wellbeing while sometimes forgetting that teacher wellbeing and leader wellbeing are prerequisites for a healthy educational ecosystem. We should therefore rethink what we mean by a successful school. Is it a school where everything happens because one or two people constantly push the system forward? Or is it a school where people have enough trust, autonomy, and collective responsibility to keep the institution moving even when one individual steps away?

Perhaps the real measure of leadership is not how many problems a principal solves. Perhaps it is how many problems the system eventually learns to solve without the principal. That requires a shift from dependency to empowerment. It means developing

The game of

Neeraja

A mesmerizing video clip that often shows up on social media is of neatly arrayed cards arranged in the form of a tall tower. As one card at the bottom is toppled, the motion slithers along the entire pile and card after card drops down – until voila! The entire tower collapses! A seemingly insignificant movement at the bottom of the configuration sets the entire destruction in motion.

Often referred to as 'The Domino Effect', this is a useful metaphor for the dynamics that govern any cohesive group or organization. No man is an island, as is often said.

What toppled that first card? And (how) can it be seen fast enough to stop all other cards from following suit? Surely that is the dream of any owner of a concern, be it a business or an institution?

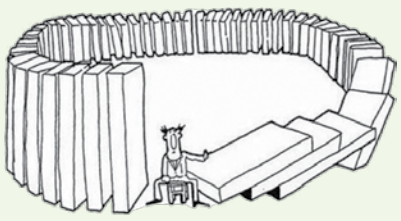
As a school owner, wouldn't you like to see that the school you own is in a stable and harmonious state that allows sustained and smooth functioning? At the very least, wouldn't you like to be alerted to the toppling of such cards, so that a massive collapse can be averted in time?

The Playing Cards

A school has its varied players (or playing cards in the above imagery!):

- School Owners or Management
- School Principal
- Teachers
- Administrative Staff
- Parents
- Students

What are the ways in which school owners can align these cards optimally? As an educator who has been a teacher as well as a Principal, I was curious to find this out.



So I began by talking to a few School Principals about how to create a nurturing environment for the head of the school that you run, and this is what I learned.

What do school owners usually expect from a Principal?

I posed this question to a few Principals. Most of them agreed that 'numbers' were predominant in the field of attention of school managements. "It's an investment, after all," said one Principal, "so their first and foremost concern is that the number of admissions should keep rising."

So much so, declared another Principal, that they even expect admissions in the months of August and September. "By this time, there are hardly any new admissions – one rare transfer, maybe! But the Management usually looks forward to admissions at any time of the year." In alignment with this expectation was another: reduction in attrition rate.

teachers who take ownership rather than wait for instructions. It means creating non-judgemental spaces where people can question, experiment, make mistakes, reflect, and learn. It means creating a culture where disagreement is not perceived as disloyalty and questioning is not mistaken for resistance. And it means recognizing a few fundamental truths: Authority without autonomy creates frustration. Responsibility without support creates exhaustion. Accountability without trust creates compliance rather than leadership.

Perhaps the goal is not to create a principal who becomes indispensable to the system, but a system that becomes strong enough not to depend on one person. Only then does the chariot truly move forward.

Note: The author acknowledges the use of AI tools to check for grammatical errors in the article.

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Dominoes

Raghavan

[Logically speaking, though, a mid-year admission to one school implies attrition from the earlier school!]

"Increasing admissions is not so simple," said another. "There are so many factors that affect the number of school admissions. The school has to be an established institution, it should have a respected culture, there should be adequate infrastructure, and the Board Exam results should be consistently good … all these affect the number of admissions." In short, it would help, most felt, if Managements looked at admissions more holistically and understand that a gestation period is inevitable before an institution becomes sought after.

Another expectation that was commonly held was restraint when it came to seeking financial resources.

"We should not ask for funds. As long as I didn't do that, my previous management gave me a free hand to try anything…"

Said another, "I know for a fact that many parents don't mind paying high fees – if they can be sure of certain expectations being met." Ruefully, one School Head declared: "If they would only allow me to use the annual fees of ONE student for Teacher Development … or Library expansion…!"

Troubleshooting

As a Principal, each day brings new crises. A contemporary challenge has been confiscation of e-cigarettes from school bags.

"The pandemic allowed free Internet access for children. Many of them could use their parents' accounts to buy these things. Costing less than five hundred rupees, this sort of purchase would largely go unnoticed by parents. But we would have to bear the brunt of it in school, as students would carry glue that carries intoxicating vapours and take a sniff every now and then!" While most such challenges are dealt with individually by Principals, there are occasions – after trying every possible solution to the problem – they turn in despair to the Management. "It would be so nice if they could see that we are reaching out in sheer desperation. We are exposing our vulnerability when we seek their help. But the common expectation is that the school should run smoothly – that's the responsibility of the Principal. We shouldn't bother the management with our issues." It would be wonderful, many agreed, if just a few problems could be discussed and solved jointly.

So by and large, it was felt that the job of the Principal was to keep parents of the students happy, ensure that everything ran on well-oiled wheels without burdening the Management with demands for additional expenditure or assistance in trouble shooting.

How can a school owner empower/support a School Principal?

"You know, I often wonder about this – aren't we (Principals) and School Managements aspiring towards the exact same goal? Don't we all wish to have a happy environment in the school for students as well as staff? Then how does this 'US and THEM' mentality creep in?" A Principal articulated her bewilderment.

"I think it is because the school is seen mainly as a financial investment that should yield quick and consistent returns," retorted another, "for which the Principal and teachers are instruments." But running a school is not merely a commercial enterprise. This is even truer today when schools are mushrooming every year. The importance of at least three stakeholders (Management, Principal and Teachers) working in collaboration needs to be felt.

Instead of taking important decisions (like, for example, a fee hike or uniform change) unilaterally, it would be so empowering for a Principal if (s) he is looped into the brainstorming and discussion that usually precedes such decisions.

"After all, we are expected to *communicate all such decisions* to parents. Which means we have to deal with the reactions. Then isn't it more reasonable to get our buy-in as well *before* the decision is finalised?"

"I want to feel respected and trusted," said an experienced Principal. "In my school, the Management reviews each of my circulars before I send them out."

Another Principal shared: "Having interviewed and recruited us, surely there was some basis for appointing us? Then, after a reasonable period of probation, can we not be trusted to do such tasks without constant supervision?"

"I have spent from my own funds for all the courses and workshops that I have attended," said a Principal of a leading school. "Along with the expectation of School Heads staying up to date with developments in the field of education should there also not be a concomitant hand of support from the Management?"

If there were just THREE things that you would change about the expectations of a School Owner, what would those be?

The most succinct response that I got for the above question was: "Recruit, Revive and Retain!"

When a school owner recruits a Principal, the recruitment process should be rigorous enough to gauge whether the candidate is aligned with the vision of the school. For example, hiring a candidate who can take independent decisions with maturity and sensitivity, and can nurture a vibrant teaching-learning culture in the school would make all the dominoes collapse – with a management that wants only large numbers and top rankers in the Board Exam! And vice versa – a Principal with aspirations to hike numbers and ensure top ranks would wilt under a management that has joyful learning and a fearless environment as its goal. So, it is critical that the recruitment process be fine-tuned to maximise chances of recruiting a Principal *who is more or less aligned with the expectations of the Management*.

Having appointed a Principal, it is important that there be a sustained and meaningful process of revival. Nurturing a school requires nurturing its Head, first of all! Only an energetic Head can infuse energy in the teachers and students. For this, it is important *not to micro-manage the Head*, but to respect and trust him/her.

And finally, it cannot be assumed that a Principal (or any employee for that matter) will stay on with the institution. So there should be active measures taken by the management to retain the Head that they have invested their time, money and effort in.

School Owners: How can you avoid the Domino Effect?

Having read the above responses of Principals, here are my questions to School Owners:

- As a school owner, what do YOU expect from your School Principal?
- Which of your school decisions would you like to take *with the inputs of your Principal*?
- What are the areas where you would SIMPLY NOT give free rein to the Principal?
- How much of the yearly budget would you be willing to allot towards Teacher and Principal Development?

Aren't these questions which any School Principal would love to hear the answers to? If you are a School Owner, please send in your responses and help our readers understand these important issues better.

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