


2017

## Rural Superintendents' Experiences in the Application of Principle-Centered Leadership at the Personal and Interpersonal Levels

Shelby Davidson  
*Van ISD*

Jennifer T. Butcher  
*Houston Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#)

[Tell us](#) how this article helped you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Davidson, Shelby and Butcher, Jennifer T. (2017) "Rural Superintendents' Experiences in the Application of Principle-Centered Leadership at the Personal and Interpersonal Levels," *School Leadership Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol12/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in School Leadership Review by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu](mailto:cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu).

## ***Rural Superintendents' Experiences in the Application of Principle-Centered Leadership at the Personal and Interpersonal Levels***

*Shelby Davidson<sup>i</sup>*  
*Van ISD*

*Jennifer T. Butcher*  
*Houston Baptist University*

---

Covey (1990) suggested that to achieve success in leadership, one must identify core values and principles and ensure that managerial and organizational systems are aligned with these values and principles. These values explained by Covey in principle-centered leadership are built upon the foundation principles of trustworthiness at the personal level and trust at the interpersonal level, which allows for empowerment at the managerial level and alignment at the organizational level. Covey explained that trust or the lack of trust is the foundation of success or failure both in relationships as well as business, industry, education, and government. Combs, Edmonson, and Harris (2013) suggested the premise that trust matters has been confirmed by research findings and trust is often the distinguishing factor between leadership success and failure.

Although much has been written about trust in the business environment, school leaders operate from different contexts and have different needs (Combs et al., 2013). In addition, approximately two-thirds of superintendents in the U.S. are employed in rural districts (Kowalski, 2013). In the past, school leaders often took trust for granted, both within the school and outside the school community (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). However, Tschannen-Moran explained there has been a trend away from trust, which makes trust more difficult for leaders to develop and sustain. In addition, the expectations for school leaders continue to become much more complex and demanding (Kowalski, 2013). Therefore, it is of utmost importance and urgent that school leaders understand the dynamics and meaning of trust for improved school organizational adaptability and productivity (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). School leaders must understand how actions encourage or destroy trust within an organization so that trust may be built by fully understanding what contributes to trust in the organization (Combs, Harris, & Edmonson, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore rural superintendents' experiences in the application of principle-centered leadership in their school districts. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What do rural superintendents experience in the application of the principle of trustworthiness at the personal level?
2. What do rural superintendents experience in the application of the principle of trust at the interpersonal level?

---

<sup>i</sup> Shelby Davidson can be reached at [shelby.davidson@vanisd.org](mailto:shelby.davidson@vanisd.org).

## Conceptual Framework

The seminal work that guided this study comes from the book, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (Covey, 1990). Covey defined principle-centered leadership as leadership based on leaders centering their lives and the leadership of organizations and people on certain “true-north” principles. Covey suggested that principle-centered leadership is practiced from the “inside out” based on four principles on four levels. The four levels of principle-centered leadership suggested by Covey are: personal (my relationship with myself), interpersonal (my responsibility to get a job done), managerial (my responsibility to get a job done with others), and organizational (my need to create structure, strategy, and systems). The four principles of principle-centered leadership identified by Covey are trustworthiness at the personal level, trust at the interpersonal level, empowerment at the managerial level, and alignment to vision at the organizational level.

## Summary of the Literature

This literature review examines the history of the superintendency. In addition, the roles and responsibilities, leadership behaviors, and preparation skills required for the superintendent position are reviewed. The expectations and challenges of the rural superintendency are examined as well as leadership and preparation skills needed for success in the rural environment. Finally, the principles of trustworthiness at the personal level and trust at the personal level are reviewed to investigate how they are used for leadership effectiveness.

### Superintendency

As the role of the superintendent has become much more visible over the years, today’s superintendent is a chief executive who must possess vision, skills, and knowledge to lead in the 21st century (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Carter and Cunningham (1997) commented that a superintendent must have a solid background in pedagogy, finance, child growth and development, politics, organizational behavior, staff development, and must be able to provide leadership in an age of pressure. Fullan (2007) noted that superintendents in rural districts may serve multiple roles with limited resources; however, superintendents in larger urban districts are confronted with varying conflicts, crises, personnel issues, and possible financial situations. Fullan also indicated that superintendents must often deal with these issues through specialists embedded within a bureaucracy. Despite the size of the district, the superintendency is a position that is increasingly more demanding and complex (Kowalski, 2013). Harris (2009) noted that superintendents are held to high expectations and with the ever increasing complexity of superintendents’ jobs and the complexity of the world in general, the superintendent must not lose focus on the ultimate goal of changing a student’s world. Harris added that the superintendent is ultimately responsible for maximizing student learning.

**Evolution and history of the superintendent position.** The first superintendent was appointed by the city of Buffalo, New York in 1837, followed by Providence, Rhode Island appointing a superintendent in 1839 (Callahan, 1966). The period of 1837 to 1942 represented a great time of change and growth for schools and their leadership (Bogotch, 2011). Kowalski (2005) noted that in 1850, 13 city schools had an administrator. Callahan (1966) indicated that because of the slow

growth of public schools, there were only 27 city superintendents in 1870. Later in the twentieth century, there were superintendents in smaller cities and towns (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). The increased need for superintendents was necessitated by conditions such as an increase in larger school districts, consolidation of rural districts, state curriculums, compulsory school attendance, and increased accountability and efficiency expectations (Kowalski, 2003). In 1915, there were 1,551 superintendents (Callahan, 1966). Kowalski (2013) noted there were approximately 14,000 local school systems utilizing a school superintendent in 2013.

The original position of superintendent was primarily clerical and created to execute policies of school boards, which consisted primarily of volunteers (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). According to Kowalski (2013), the first superintendents performed mostly routine, menial administrative tasks and had very little actual authority. During the early 20th century, school boards and city executives continued to withhold power from superintendents. The school board members and city executives were fearful of the power superintendents might acquire and did not want to establish independence from the politics of city government. Kowalski indicated that many issues of the larger school systems started to create problems such as money mismanagement, inadequate facilities, and unqualified teachers. Lawmakers were encouraged to delegate more local power and authority to superintendents to combat many of the burgeoning issues. Even with the problems encountered and the encouragement to address them, there was still strong opposition to making the superintendent a professional position.

**Challenges and changes of the rural superintendent.** According to Lamkin (2006), rural superintendents face unique issues and challenges that often rendered their role as less attractive than superintendents in larger districts. It has become increasingly more difficult to attract, reward, and retain school leaders in the rural setting. Lamkin also revealed rural superintendents have unique challenges in their role that require specific skills, training, and connections to the field of practice. Lamkin suggested that increased preparation and support could attract more candidates and help rural superintendents succeed in their early years of service.

Lamkin (2006) noted some of the challenges that are unique to the role of rural superintendent. The rural superintendent was often the sole chief executive in the community and often was the target of much criticism. Lamkin indicated that rural superintendents bore sole responsibility for success or failure of the district and suffered a lack of privacy. Lamkin also suggested that rural superintendents often came under intense scrutiny for everything they do in all settings.

In a study of superintendents and principals in small, rural school districts in Texas, Canales, Tejada-Delgado, and Slate (2008) determined that the dual role of superintendent and principal in the rural district required many different leadership skills and behaviors. Based on the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire XII, superintendents, principals and school board presidents agreed on the most important successful leadership behaviors needed for success in the rural district. The most important behavior needed by superintendents/principals in rural districts, as ranked by superintendents, principals and school board presidents in the questionnaire, was tolerance of freedom by the superintendent for allowing the followers initiative, decision and action. Also, ranked as highly important was the representation of the school by the superintendent and consideration of the needs of school employees by the superintendent.

**Decision-making skills needed for the rural superintendency.** Jenkins (2007) reported that the making of tough decisions by rural superintendents came with no guarantees. It was important that superintendents develop a capacity for making decisions as the superintendent's ethics and values were involved in the decision making process. Langlois (2004) suggested that it was difficult to make a decision in alignment with organizational standards when they conflict with the decision maker's personal values and beliefs. The decision making process used by the superintendents in the study was deemed ethical when not only did they incorporate reflection in the process, but their personal and professional values shaped their organizational workplace. A superintendent's values served as a support, which kept him or her authentic and helped hold the superintendent morally responsible when making a decision. Consequently, rural school leaders in their decision making remain committed to personal, professional, and educational values in making tough decisions (Campbell, Gold, & Lunt, 2003).

**Community values in the rural setting.** Jenkins (2007) suggested that a rural superintendent who does not account for community values and reaction when making a decision is making a serious mistake. In addition, not only was it important for the superintendent to consider community values, but also how he considered them in the rural environment was also extremely important. While never suggesting that a superintendent compromise his own personal values, it was of utmost importance to be aware of the community's values and their expectations of values for the superintendent. Jenkins suggested that superintendent longevity in the rural community could also be linked to acquiring some of the values that are most unique to the community. Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) found that superintendents in rural districts also desired to hire principals in their districts who recognized the importance of commitment to the community.

**Preparation needs and skills for success as a rural superintendent.** Spanneut, Tobin, and Ayers (2011) suggested that if superintendents are to thrive and be successful, they must recognize both their leadership skill limitations as well as their leadership skill needs. The superintendent must know how to identify their weaknesses and how to address these needs through professional growth and development. Holloway (2001) noted that superintendents desire continuing professional development to help them deal with the demands and complexities of the job. Hyle, Ivory, and McClellan(2010) studied what knowledge counted most from the perspective of rural superintendents and also how they gained this important knowledge.

Hyle et al. (2010) indicated the knowledge that really counts was continually changing because of the rural context themes of competing visions with the superintendent being at the center of the wheel, balancing, negotiating, and weighing decisions. The researchers found that superintendent preparation programs may not provide the necessary training and skills needed to prepare them for their jobs. Because of the unique challenges of the rural superintendency, Lamkin (2006) suggested improved preparation and support for the role of superintendent. In addition, improved preparation could advance more potential candidates, attract more qualified candidates, and help these rural superintendents to be successful in their schools

### **Trustworthiness at the Personal Level**

Trustworthiness at the personal level is based on character and competence and is the foundation of trust (Covey, 1990). Covey added that character is “what you are as a person” and competence is “what you can do” (p. 31). However, Covey emphasized that if a leader has character but is not competent, they will not develop trust and many leaders are not considered trustworthy because they have become “obsolete” from a competence standpoint in their organizations. Covey noted that both character and competence must be demonstrated by a leader to be considered trustworthy and a leader’s competence must be continually increased through professional development. Maxwell (1998) added that a leader must demonstrate competence, connection, and character in order to have trustworthiness.

Combs et al. (2015) suggested that because of the complex issues manifested by today’s social problems, leaders have multiple opportunities to display character in their actions and decisions. Character is more about what individuals do than what they say and often there may be a gap between a leader’s desires for themselves and the true “right” thing to do (Stephenson, 2009). Stephenson further explained that character is often revealed by how one deals with the many pressures and temptations encountered and not only doing right when there is something to gain, but doing the right thing in all situations.

### **Trust at the Interpersonal Level**

Covey (1990) defined trust as “the emotional bank account between two people that enables them to have a win-win performance agreement” (p. 31). Covey explained that if there is trust between two individuals based on trustworthiness, they will have better communication, more empathy for one another, more synergism as a team, and they will depend on one another to be more productive in the organization. If there are competence issues, further training and development must take place to resolve these issues. If there are character issues, there must be actions undertaken to rebuild or repair trust. Covey commented that trust, or lack of trust, is the primary source of triumph or breakdown in personal relationships as well as in various types of organizations. Trust builds culture and broken trust affects everyone in the organization (Olsen, 2009). There is a crisis of trust that may be greater throughout the world today than at any other time in history (Covey & Link, 2012). Trust is the primary building block of leadership and a leader loses influence if he or she ever loses the trust of the people (Maxwell, 1998). Covey (1990) suggested an “inside-out” approach to developing trust where we must change and control our private selves and subrogate our personal motives to higher purposes and principles. Covey maintained that this “inside-out” approach is a renewing process that causes growth and increased interdependence, thus resulting in greater trust.

Ultimately, Covey (1990) asserted that leaders who base their personality upon correct principles build trust with others. In addition, trust is built upon a leader’s trustworthiness over an extended period of time. Communication occurs easily and mistakes are allowed in a high trust environment. However, communication is extremely difficult and ineffective in a low trust environment. Covey commented that in a high trust environment, leaders don’t have to supervise people because they can provide self-supervision. The leader offers guidance and help for the people as expectations are agreed upon by all stakeholders. In addition, the needs of the people

must be intertwined with the needs of the organization. There is strong accountability and the people are involved in the evaluation of their performance.

### **Methodology**

The research design of this study was a phenomenological investigation. Marshall and Rossman (2006) defined phenomenology as “the study of lived experiences and the way we understand those experiences to develop a worldview” (p. 104). Marshall and Rossman explained that there is both a structure and essence to common experiences that can be described in narrative form. Phenomenological research is most appropriate when the researcher desires to understand the common or shared experiences of several individuals with a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Creswell also noted that as these common experiences are better understood, policies and practices might be constructed to better understand the many facets of the phenomenon. The goal of a phenomenological study, according to Creswell, is to investigate a concept or phenomenon and describe common meanings for multiple individuals of the lived experiences of that phenomenon. While the researcher describes the common experiences of the participants experiencing the phenomenon, the ultimate purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the “universal essence” of the individual experiences associated with the phenomenon.

### **Participants**

This study was conducted with 10 superintendents representing rural public school districts in East Texas. Participants from the study were purposely chosen from several different counties as well as from districts of varying sizes of student enrollment. As criteria for inclusion in the study, superintendents must:

1. Serve in a rural district as defined by Kowalski (2013) and/or serve in a district located in a town of less than 10,000 (population).
2. Serve as a superintendent in the Region VII Educational Service Center Region.
3. Have served as a superintendent in their current district for at least two years.
4. Be identified by the Region VII Educational Service Center School Operations Director as providing exceptional leadership in their district.

An “insider” was used to help identify and recruit potential participants. An “insider” is one who helps identify persons who meet the sampling criteria of the study, helps facilitate requests for participation, and assists with getting questions to the participants (King & Horrocks, 2010). King and Horrocks suggested that using an insider can be advantageous to the researcher in identifying the potential participants who meet the sampling criteria of the investigation as well as providing a greater opportunity for access to the participant pool without the need for lengthy research. King and Horrocks noted that participants are much more likely to participate if the request originates from a trusted source. The researcher used the Region Service Center School Operations Director who was knowledgeable of rural superintendents in the region to help identify and recruit superintendents who are viewed as providing exceptional leadership in their districts. Region VII is composed of 96 public school districts, with 89 of these districts being identified as primarily rural. Of these 89 primarily rural districts, 10 superintendents were asked to participate in the study.

Participants in the study ranged from forty-three to sixty-eight years of age. All participants were of Caucasian ethnicity and all were male. Years spent as superintendents of their current district range from four to sixteen years. Four of the participants are serving their first superintendent role and two of the superintendents are previously retired superintendents. The participants were informed that their names would not be associated with any of the research findings and the confidentiality of their responses would be protected. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

## Results and Discussion

Research questions were used to facilitate this study. These questions investigated the lived experiences of rural superintendents in the application of the principles of trustworthiness at the personal level and trust at the interpersonal level. Major findings of the study were summarized by the research questions. From the answers to these questions, several emergent themes developed.

*Research Question One.* Research question one investigated the lived experiences of rural superintendents in the application of the principle of trustworthiness at the personal level. Emergent themes included family and faith, being service oriented, continual learning, leading balanced lives, believing in other people, and building and maintaining trustworthiness.

**Family and faith.** All of the participants emphasized the importance of their family as being the most important factor in building their character to where it is today. This included the superintendents' parents providing examples of being honest, working hard, and high character. For example, David discussed how he developed character from observing his parents practice trustworthiness and honesty in their own lives. Ethan learned the lesson being close and depending upon one another from his family.

In regards to family, six of the participants noted the impact of their father in their character development. John spoke of how his father taught him to establish and stick with his own values so that others did not see him as simply a "reed blowing in the wind." Charles looked to his father as his role model. He noted that there was a right way, a wrong way, and his father's way of doing things. Ben noted that his father taught him about love, devotion, and family. Jeffrey shared that his father was a policeman whom many people in his town knew. Jeffrey spoke about how he wanted to live up to the expectation of being his father's son.

Eight of the participants stressed the importance of the role of Christianity in their character progression. For example, Ethan felt that being extremely involved in church was a big part of his family's life. Gary noted that his father was a Southern Baptist preacher who spent over sixty years in the ministry. Therefore, he grew up in a home of strong, Christian values. William shared that he grew up in a Christian home and accepted Jesus Christ as part of his life and being Christ-centered is a major part of who he is. Charles spoke of how the right way of doing things in his family was based on their faith.

**Being service oriented.** Being service-oriented was also an emergent theme of the participants. In their discussion of experiences with trustworthiness at the interpersonal level, all ten of the participants discussed the importance of being service oriented toward those that they lead. Eight



of the participants said that being service oriented was one of the most important characteristics of principle-centered leaders. However, all felt that being service oriented was a requirement for success as a leader. For example, John stressed that a leader has to be a servant to everyone and being service-oriented means that you care about other people as much or more than yourself.

Charles noted that one cannot step on others to advance your own career, but one can advance the organization through servant leadership. Seth stressed that one cannot be a dictator, a changer and fixer, and have long-term success. Gary stressed that people should be in education because it is a calling, ministry, or service and one must truly love kids to be in the profession. If not, a disservice is being done to the students. William stressed the position to serve other people. Scott spoke of serving in a capacity to make people grow and feel better.

**Continual learning.** Another emergent theme of participants regarding superintendents' experiences with trustworthiness at the personal level was continual learning. All of the participants discussed how they promoted their intellectual growth. Five of the participants listed continual learning as one of the most important characteristics of principle-centered leaders. Scott noted that continual learning might be the most important characteristic of principle-centered leaders, because if the leader is not growing, the people will not grow either. Scott stressed that a leader must not only learn, but also share the information that is learned. William emphasized that a leader who thinks that he or she knows everything cannot get any better. William equated continual learning with continual improvement. David stressed that to keep from continuing to have the same experiences, one must continue to learn in order to get better. John explained that if the individuals in the organization are to get better, it must begin with the leader. John also stressed that if one is to be a leader instead of a mere manager, one must continue to learn.

All of the participants discussed how they promoted their intellectual growth. Seven of the ten participants noted that reading was a primary way of promoting intellectual growth and seven of the ten participants also noted that attending conferences and/or professional development was a primary way of advancing intellectual growth. Gary stressed learning from others' mistakes. Scott emphasized that individuals are either getting better or worse and one cannot simply stand still. Scott remarked that learning is a lifelong experience and the desire to be around people who make him think. Ben spoke of a quote from his father-in-law, "If you rest, you rust."

**Leading balanced lives.** Another emergent theme of participants regarding superintendents' experiences with trustworthiness at the personal level was leading balanced lives. All ten participants stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between work and family life. For example, Ben explained that maintaining a balance between work and family is not a problem because he loves, honors, and values his family and wants to be with them and be a part of their lives. Ben further noted that he didn't want to be like many of the superintendents of larger schools where it would be more difficult to balance between work and family. Gary stressed that spending time with the family helps to keep the balance between work and family.

As another example, Ethan explained that he has gotten better balancing work and family over time. He also noted that it is important to plan for a time to simply get away from school with your family. Gary spoke of how it really isn't a struggle to balance family and work because his

school board promotes a balance in his life. Seth explained that while he hasn't always been the best example of leading a balanced life, he preaches it to his principals and others that work for him. Charles suggested that achieving a balance between work and family life is easier than when he worked in a larger urban district. John stressed that one needs to focus on relationships with family and friends when away from work. David said that his family was his hobby.

Two participants talked about the difficulty of separating work and family. Jeffrey said that work was his family and the two were simply intertwined. He further explained that school had been his family's life. Scott talked about how difficult achieving a balance between work and family life early on in his career. He felt that so many people were depending upon him. He didn't want to let anybody down. However, he noted that he did a better job of achieving balance as he became older.

As to promoting emotional growth, all participants shared different avenues. Seven of the ten participants discussed the value of church and Bible study. William explained that he stays grounded through Bible study and church. David stressed that he relies on faith and prayer. He asks for guidance, strength, and direction through prayer. Ethan explained that emotional growth comes through God and family. Other things mentioned in achieving emotional growth include exercise, community activities and music.

**Believing in other people.** Still another emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with trustworthiness at the personal level was believing in other people. Seven of the ten participants listed believing in other people as one of the top three most important characteristics of principle-centered leadership. For example, David noted that he owes his success to the people around him. Charles explained that although believing in others doesn't come naturally for him, he believes it encourages those whom are believed in. Ethan suggested that people know whether you believe in them or not. Gary explained that belief in others is important because after all, the school business is all about people. Scott spoke about the importance of believing in people, allowing them to do their job, and having expectations of them. He also emphasized that as a leader, you must move your people forward.

**Building and maintaining trustworthiness.** The final emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with trustworthiness at the personal level was building and maintaining trustworthiness. All of the participants spoke about the importance of building and maintaining their trustworthiness with others. While all agreed that building and maintaining trustworthiness is required to be an effective leader, there were varying ideas of the best way to build and maintain trustworthiness. Some of the ideas suggested include ensuring that actions match up with what is said as well as visibility, communication, and honesty.

Five participants spoke about people watching your actions. For example, Charles explained that a superintendent's actions must be consistent and motives driven by the right reasons. He said, "Talk is cheap, but people watch actions." William talked about making sure one's core values match up with what one says and how one acts and that decisions and recommendations are congruent with these values. Gary noted that one must lead by his own example. It is important not to ask others to do something that he wouldn't do. Ethan explained that people see you every day and observe your actions and that observation tells them what you're all about. Ben

commented that superintendents are judged on their character, how one expresses their beliefs and how one acts.

Seth talked about communication and visibility as a requirement for trustworthiness, while David also spoke about visibility, Jeffrey also talked about communication as well. Scott discussed honesty and always telling people the truth. Scott also added that he always tries to help people. John spoke about treating each individual equitably as well as communication.

*Research Question Two.* Research question two investigated the lived experiences of rural superintendents in the application of the principle of trust at the interpersonal level. Emergent themes included building relationships, building others up, listening, keeping promises and commitments, and modeling by example.

**Building relationships.** An emergent theme regarding superintendent's experiences with trust at the interpersonal level was building relationships. All participants spoke of the importance of building relationships to earn trust. Participants were eager to share their experiences in building relationships. All of the participants talked about the value of communication and just getting to know others in building relationships.

Ethan, William, and Ben emphasized listening to others. Ethan spoke of listening and letting others know that you're interested in what they are saying. He also stressed the importance of following through with anything that you say you're going to do. Ben said, "Listen to their story." William stressed giving others the opportunity to tell you what's on their mind. He emphasized trying not to cut others off when listening as well as encouragement of others. Jeffrey and William spoke of being open to the concerns of others as well.

Scott, David, Jeffrey, Charles, Seth, Gary, and John stressed building relationships come from activities such as interaction, people observing actions over time, and communication with others. John spoke of the values that people see him model every day. Gary stressed honesty and making sure that your actions back up your words as you prove yourself on a daily basis with the way you conduct yourself and the way you deal with people. Seth also emphasized honesty and truly getting to know others. Charles spoke of taking time to visit, talking with people, and getting to know them. Jeffrey stressed communication and building lines of communications, avoiding cutting off discussions from others and being open to others' line of thinking. David spoke of investing time and having interaction with people. Scott emphasized building relationships and trust through the experiences people have with each other.

**Building others up.** An emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with trust at the interpersonal level was building others up. All of the participants discussed how they build others up in the organization. While all embraced the importance of building others up in the organization, the participants differed somewhat in how they accomplished building others up.

For example, Ben, William, Gary, Ethan, and John all talked about the importance of allowing others to have greater responsibility as a means of building them up. Ben talked about recognizing their talents and William mentioned outlining goals for accomplishment. Gary noted that he often lets his people make presentations to the school board as a means of giving

responsibility. Ethan discussed giving added responsibility and John discussed giving opportunities for taking risks.

As far as other means of building others up, Jeffrey noted that he just lets them know by talking to them. Charles stressed that he builds others up through the informal relationships and looking at them eyeball to eyeball as well as handwritten notes to recognize accomplishments. Scott noted that he continues to build on what his people do well. William noted that he acknowledges success while David spends time complementing. Gary has an opening day pep event and he also notes that he listens in order to build others up. Seth tries to encourage others by being positive. Ethan noted that it is important to recognize accomplishments.

**Listening.** Another emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with trust at the interpersonal level was listening. Participants discussed how they sought to understand others' point of view. Eight of the participants noted that listening was the best way to truly understand others' point of view. For example, Scott noted that it is important to ask questions about "why." David said, "I try to listen and keep my mouth shut." He stressed the importance of listening before you talk. Jeffrey stressed communication in understanding others' point of view. Charles emphasized listening and asking questions for clarification. He also noted giving others the opportunity to express their point of view. Gary spoke of not only listening, but trying to put yourself in their place as best you can to understand where they are coming from. John explained that listening involves listening beyond the conversation that they're having. He spoke of how many times what people are telling him is not the real issue. It takes seeing past what they are saying to get to the root of the problem. John described this as empathetic listening.

Another example of listening was provided by William. William spoke of giving people plenty of time to talk and not talking over people. He also stressed asking clarifying questions and extension questions before telling them what you want them to hear. Ben noted that one must listen first, select or pick out what they are saying that they need to do, and then connect by letting them know your feelings about the conversation.

**Keeping promises and commitments.** Another emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with trust at the interpersonal level was the importance of keeping promises and commitments. All ten of the participants commented on the importance of keeping promises and commitments in building trust. For example, Charles shared that everything he says has to be right on because people will take what he says and bank on it. He stressed that people often hang on to every word that he speaks. Seth said, "If you say stuff and don't follow through, then they're going to lose confidence in you." Ethan stressed that you must follow through with anything that you say you're going to do. Scott emphasized that nothing is more important in building trust, confidence, and your integrity level than keeping commitments. He said, "There's no ifs, ands, or buts. That has to happen." David commented, "I think if you say you're going to do it, you've got to do it." Jeffrey stated, "You just don't lie to people. You don't make promises you can't keep. You just don't."

Gary stressed that while you don't make promises that you can't keep, you should also never make a threat that you can't back up or would be willing to follow up on. John stressed that keeping your word builds trust. He stated, "If I say I'm going to do something, I need to do it, or

if I can't, I need to give an explanation why I can't do it." William explained, "There is no way around it. If you say you're going to do something, you need to do it. If you don't, you need to have the courage to tell them you didn't and why you didn't. You go and ask for their forgiveness or whatever."

Eight of the participants discussed the importance of choosing words carefully so people do not misinterpret what they are saying. Gary commented that you have to be careful what you say because often people want you to make a promise. John noted that even shaking your head can be misinterpreted as agreement. Seth noted that just being positive when someone is initiating something can be mistaken as agreement with them. David emphasized that often people only hear what they want to hear and it is not anything like it was said. Ben stated that you often have to tell people, "Now, I'm not promising you this, but I'm telling you I will look into it."

**Modeling by example.** Another emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with trust at the interpersonal level was modeling by example. Nine of the participants discussed the importance of modeling by example as a way to build trust. These nine superintendents discussed that they modeled to others by their example to build trust. However, the means by which they modeled varied among the participants.

For example, three of the participants noted that they model by example by just being themselves. Jeffrey said, "I just try to be myself wherever I am. I don't wear a tie." Ethan spoke of trying to be the same no matter what the situation. Charles stressed he and his family are no better than everybody else. He said, "I sit in the stands and spit sunflower seeds with the best of 'em. I think it's good for people to see."

Four of the participants spoke of the importance of sticking to morals and values and/or keeping one's word as a means to model by example. Ethan stressed morals and values and William spoke of sticking to one's values when making decisions or recommendations. William also encouraged others to readily admit their mistakes when they stray from their values. Ben stressed that modeling by example is simple. He stated, "If you tell them you're going to do it, do it." Scott noted that modeling by example means walking the walk. He also emphasized keeping one's word.

Gary suggested that his example is set by the language that he uses. He also noted that one should set the example of being visible. Seth spoke of being an example by being positive and supportive. David emphasized setting an example of not asking anyone to do something that you are not willing to do yourself.

## Conclusions

This qualitative study investigated rural superintendents' experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts. This study affirms that practicing principle-centered leadership helps superintendents to become effective leaders in their districts. During this study, it was apparent that effective superintendents practice the tenets of principle-centered leadership with different methods and actions based on their beliefs and personalities. In addition, it was apparent in the study that trustworthiness and trust is the foundation of principle-

centered leadership, which allows for empowerment and alignment to vision. Based on the findings from the individual interviews, specific conclusions are discussed in terms of the research questions that guided the study.

Research question one. What do rural superintendents experience in the application of trustworthiness at the personal level? Based on the findings, it can be concluded that superintendents' family and their faith had the largest impact on their character progression. Superintendents feel that being service oriented is one of the most important characteristics of principle-centered leaders. The findings were also consistent with the research of Greenleaf (1977) regarding building trustworthiness through servant leadership and the research of Spears (2004) regarding the characteristics central to the development of servant leader as well as the research of Blanchard (1998) regarding leading and building trustworthiness with servant leadership.

Continual learning helps to build a superintendent's trustworthiness and effectiveness in the district. Superintendents must strive to balance work and family life. Effective superintendents believe in other people as they build their trustworthiness with others. Furthermore, it can be concluded that superintendents must continually build and maintain their trustworthiness with those they lead. Superintendents may use different methods and actions, but agree that building and maintaining trustworthiness is required for effective leadership in their district. These findings were consistent with the principle of trustworthiness at the personal level (Covey, 1990) and the assertion by Combs et al. (2015) that competent leaders are continually learning and improving themselves and others.

Research question two. What do rural superintendents experience in the application of trust at the personal level? Based on the findings, it can be concluded that superintendents work to build relationships with those they lead in order to establish trust at the interpersonal level. Even though different strategies may be used by individual superintendents, relationships must be built to build trust in the district. In addition, building others up in the organization builds trust. Of paramount importance is the value of superintendents keeping their promises and commitments to others. People do not trust leaders who fail to keep promises and commitments. Furthermore, superintendents must model to others that they lead by their example in order to build trust in the district.

The findings were consistent with the principle of trust at the interpersonal level (Covey, 1990) and the suggestion by Combs et al. (2015) that the leader may build trust by fully understanding what contributes to trust in the organization. The findings were also consistent with the research of Greenleaf (1977) regarding building trust through servant leadership and the research of Spears (2004) regarding the characteristics central to the development of servant leader as well as the research of Blanchard (1998) regarding leading and building trust with servant leadership. In addition, it is of utmost importance and urgent that school leaders understand the dynamics and meaning of trust for improved school organizational adaptability and productivity (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

### **Implications for Practice**

Followers tend to trust those whose personality is founded upon correct principles (Covey, 1990). These principles as suggested by Covey are trustworthiness at the personal level, trust at the interpersonal level, empowerment at the managerial level, and alignment to vision at the organizational level. The findings of this study provide practices by superintendents to build their trustworthiness and trust with others.

The suggested practices related to trustworthiness and trust aligns with the practices for building trust suggested by Combs et al. (2015). The suggested practices are also consistent with the research of Greenleaf (1977) regarding building trust and trustworthiness through servant leadership and the research of Spears (2004) regarding the characteristics central to the development of servant leader, as well as the research of Blanchard (1998) regarding leading and building trust and trustworthiness with servant leadership. The practices align with the conditions for building trustworthiness and trust at the personal and interpersonal level suggested by Covey (1990).

Suggestions to implement for practice include the following:

1. Build character and trustworthiness through family values and faith.
2. Build trustworthiness and trust through servant leadership.
3. Build competence and trustworthiness through continual learning and improvement.
4. Believe in other people.
5. Maintain a healthy balance between work and family life.
6. Continually build and maintain trustworthiness through different strategies.
7. Build relationships with others to increase trust.
8. Build others up to increase trust.
9. Keep all promises and commitment to others to increase trust.
10. Model and lead by example daily to increase trust.

### **Recommendations**

Due to the value of trustworthiness and trust in promoting empowerment and alignment to vision in school districts as requirements for superintendents' effectiveness, it is important to consider multiple positions, characteristics of people, and backgrounds regarding principle-centered leadership. Other research recommendations include the following:

1. Interview principals regarding their experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership.
2. Interview other central office administrators regarding their experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts.
3. Interview suburban and urban superintendents regarding their experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts.
4. Interview women superintendents regarding their experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts.

5. Interview superintendents of diverse cultural backgrounds regarding their experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts.
6. Interview superintendents and/ or other school leaders regarding challenges and problems encountered in applying principle-centered leadership in their organizations.

### References

- Blanchard, K. (1998). Servant leadership revisited. In L. Spears, (Ed.), *Insights on Leadership: Service, stewardship, spirit, and servant leadership*, (pp. 21-28), New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Bogotch, I.E. (2011). A history of public school leadership: The first century. In F.W. English (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of educational leadership: Advances in theory, research, and practice*. (pp. 7-33). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Callahan, R.E. (1966). *The superintendent of schools: A historical analysis*. St. Louis, MO: Washington University Graduate Institute of Education. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED0104410).
- Campbell, C., Gold, A., & Lunt, I. (2003). Articulating leadership values in action: Conversations with school leaders. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 6(3), 203-221.
- Canales, M.T., Tejada-Delgado, C., & Slate, J. R. (2008). Leadership behaviors of superintendent/principals in small, rural school districts in Texas. *Rural Educator*, 29(3), 1-7.
- Carter, G.R. & Cunningham, W.G. (1997). *The American school superintendent: leading in an age of pressure*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass Publishers.
- Combs, J.P., Edmonson, S. & Harris, S. (2013). *The trust factor: Strategies for school leaders*. New York, NY:Routledge.
- Combs, J.P., Harris, S., & Edmonson, S. (2015). Four essential practices for building trust. *Educational Leadership*, 72(7), 18-22.
- Covey, S.R. (1990). *Principle-centered leadership*. New York, NY: Summit Books.
- Covey, S.M.R.& Link, M. (2012). *Smart trust*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among Five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cruzeiro, P.A., & Boone, M. (2009). Rural and small school principal candidates: Perspectives of hiring superintendents. *Rural Educator*, 31(1) 1-9.
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York, NY: The Teacher's College Press.
- Greenleaf, R.K., (1977). *Servant Leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Harris, S. (2009). *Learning from the best: Lessons from award winning superintendents*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Holloway, J.H. (2001). Setting standards for the school superintendent. *Educational Leadership*, 58(5), 84-85.
- Hoyle, J.R., Bjork, L.G., Collier, V. & Glass, T. (2005). *The superintendent as CEO: Standards based performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.



- Hyle, A., Ivory, G., & McClellan, R.L. (2010). Hidden expert knowledge: The knowledge that counts for the small school-district superintendent. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 5(4), 154-178.
- Jenkins, C. (2007). Considering the community: How one rural superintendent perceives community values and their effect on decision-making. *Rural Educator*, 28(3), 28-32.
- King, N. & Horrocks, C. (2010). *Interviews in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Kowalski, T. J. (2003). *Contemporary school administration: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kowalski, T.J. (2005). Evolution of the school district position. In L.G. Bjork and T.J. Kowalski (Eds.) *The contemporary school superintendent: Preparation, practice, and development* (pp. 1-18). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Kowalski, T.J. (2013). *The school superintendent: Theory, practice, and cases*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lamkin, M.L. (2006). Challenges and changes faced by rural superintendents. *The Rural Educator*, 28(1), 17-24.
- Langlois, L. (2004). Responding ethically: Complex decision-making by school district superintendents. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 32(2), 78-93.
- Marshall, C. & Rossman, G.B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Maxwell, J.C. (1998). *The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.
- Olsen, R. (2009). Leadership develops people through the power of collaboration. In S. Harris (Ed.), *Learning from the best: Lessons from award-winning superintendents*, (pp. 28-29). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Spanneut, G., Tobin, J., & Ayers, S. (2011). Identifying the professional development needs of school superintendents. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 6(3), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://cnx.org/content/m38487/1.3/>
- Spears, L. (2004). Practicing servant-leadership. *Leader to Leader*, 34, 7-11.
- Stephenson, S. (2009). *Leading with trust: How to build strong school teams*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Stephenson, S. (2009). *Leading with trust: How to build strong school teams*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). *Trust matters*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.