

# The Principal of Humanity

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**K**KNOWN variously as the snoop, the leader, the autocrat, the educator, and the boss, the secondary-school principal does business with many people—with teachers, students, parents, the police, and other citizens of the school community. His strength is his understanding of people and his perception of their problems; his effectiveness depends largely on his facility in human relations.

Serving an internship in educational administration, being, in effect, a student-principal, gave me new insight, sympathy, and appreciation for the principal who tries to do his job by fulfilling the expectations of the many people whom he must serve. As an intern, I was assigned to observe the principal, Mr. L., at work by becoming his shadow, his *alter ego*. I recall many conferences of varied kinds that took place in Mr. L.'s office, conferences that were successful because of his skill and understanding in dealing with people.

A youngster who had scratched his name on a classroom table was sent to Mr. L. After the boy sat down and was squirming in apprehension at the ordeal, the principal began to talk to him, quietly, in a matter-of-fact way. "Well, Jimmy, I understand that you have put your name on a table, and so now it belongs to you. You may take it home with you and bring me forty-five dollars to replace it. (Pause.) Or if you don't want to do that, you can bring your father over to school, and the two of you can refinish the table. (Pause.) Or if you can't manage that, you can pay to have the top refinished. (Pause.) Well, son, you don't have to decide right now. When you go home tonight, talk

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Isabel Johnson, of Dearborn, Michigan, won a Hopwood Award at the University of Michigan when she submitted this paper.

it over with your dad, and come in tomorrow to let me know what you have decided to do." The boy, frightened because he had been sent to the principal, was obviously relieved that the matter could be settled so reasonably. He left the office, knowing that he had a responsibility to make amends for the damage he had done, but knowing, too, from Mr. L.'s tone, manner, and smile, that the payment would erase the debt. He had not been labeled "bad boy."

The next person to come to the office was the head coach, reporting on the bus transportation he had arranged for the football boys. He thought that transporting the team by school bus had been satisfactory; but before the next trip he would talk to the boys and to the other staff members about conduct on the bus. Mr. L. agreed that the "horsing around" reported was unnecessary and even dangerous. The principal used this conference to introduce another problem related to football.

A father had called to say that his son had stayed after school for football practice and hadn't arrived home until after dark. A group of boys had waited at the bike racks and tried a shake-down operation by demanding money from the boy before they would let him take his bike. The boy had no money and had been detained for some time. He couldn't identify the boys and recalled having seen only one around school before—a boy who stuttered. The coach said that he would have a staff member supervise the area of the bike rack after every practice.

Mr. L. took out the yearbook, looking at all the pictures to see if he could spot a trouble-maker who stuttered. He found a likely suspect. He checked the child's schedule, and as the period ended, he happened to be near the proper classroom door. When the boy stepped into the corridor, the principal walked along with him and invited him to step into his office. Summoning a student to the office usually frightens him and provokes a defensive attitude. A conference begun on a less formal note is likely to be more productive. The principal's purpose in this interview was to get enough information from Jimmy T. so that he could stop the shakedown operation before it became more extensive and more serious. As Mr. L. told

Jimmy about the incident reported by the parent, Jimmy's eyes opened wide; he looked away; he wiggled. Mr. L. finished his story and then said, "Now, Jimmy, if you had anything to do with this business, I want you to say so. If you tell me the truth, you will not be in any trouble—we'll work out something." Jimmy said that he didn't understand. Mr. L. patiently repeated the account of the incident and then asked Jimmy directly if he had asked any boy for money. This time Jimmy admitted that he had tried to borrow money from a friend, one who had loaned him money on previous occasions. Mr. L. nodded agreeably as the boy stuttered his explanation and named the other boys who were with him. Apparently accepting the boy's story as a true one, Mr. L. concluded the interview by saying, "Well, Jimmy, I'm glad you were just trying to borrow money. But some boys are demanding money from other kids and threatening them. These boys must be new to our school if they think they can get away with it. You older boys know that they will be in real trouble if this sort of thing happens again. You can help the new students by setting them straight, and I want you to help me keep them out of trouble. So, Jimmy, if you see them threatening other kids, tell them to lay off. Will you do this for me, Jimmy?" Jimmy assured the principal that he would cooperate and "set them other kids straight." The shakedown operation ended.

But two weeks later Jimmy was in more trouble and had to be sent home. Mr. L. called Jimmy's mother, Mrs. T., to ask her to come to school for a conference the next morning at ten o'clock. He suggested that she should question Jimmy about the fight he had been in, the reason for his being sent home.

A little before ten o'clock the next morning, a member of the central administrative staff dropped in for an impromptu conference about plans for a language laboratory. Although the principal was anxious to get the work on the laboratory started and did not wish to offend the staff administrator, he would not keep the parent waiting. Fortunately the administrator wanted to look over some rooms that might be converted into a lab and agreed to return to the office later.

Jimmy had been scuffling with another boy and, when he thought he was losing the fight, had pulled a screwdriver out of his pocket and tried to stab his opponent. The stabbing attempt was unsuccessful, but genuine. The screwdriver pierced the boy's clothing, tracing a deep scratch across the boy's back. When the victim's father saw the scratch and heard the story, he was furious. He reported the incident to the police, who, in turn, called Mr. L. The police agreed to Mr. L.'s request that they take no action until he had had a chance to work with Jimmy and his parents.

Mrs. T. entered the office and reported her son's version of the fight. She did not know about the screwdriver, nor did she realize the police had been notified. The principal explained to the mother that he was worried about Jimmy. He didn't want Jimmy to have a police record that would be a liability to him in the future. The police would stay out of the affair if Mr. L. assured them he was making progress with the boy. He enlisted Mrs. T.'s help in convincing Jimmy that he must tell the truth and cooperate with the school. The mother was also concerned about the police action—she had had enough of that already with her eleventh-grade son.

Jimmy returned to school the next day, reporting first to Mr. L. Their conversation was general at first, concerned with how his classes were going. When Jimmy had relaxed enough to talk freely, Mr. L. told him about the conference with his mother. He tried to impress the boy that he was in trouble that might lead to a police record and that to avoid having such a record he must tell the truth. Then the principal began questioning the youth about the screwdriver—where did he get it and how did he happen to have it in his pocket? Jimmy haltingly told his story. Mr. L. nodded, went on to another question, and then came back to the screwdriver. Every time Jimmy told about it, he changed his story slightly. The principal, aware that he was making little progress with the boy, brought the interview to a close by telling Jimmy that if during the day he should happen to think of something that he hadn't told about the fight, he should walk right into the office and tell him about it. After

Jimmy left, the principal called the police and asked them to wait for a couple of days before questioning the boy.

In dealing with this matter, the principal had questioned the boy skillfully, given him a chance to "remember" something else, made it easy for Jimmy to walk into the office to talk to him again, and delayed the police questioning to give Jimmy time to reflect upon what had been accomplished in this interview.

The attendance office and court representative for the city schools came to the office to ask if Mr. L. would accept a boy who had been transferred from Detroit. The child lived outside the geographical limits of the area serviced by this particular school, but because of Mr. L.'s success in dealing with students, the attendance officer wanted him enrolled in this school. The boy had been in an ungraded room in Detroit not because he was dull, but because his behavior was such that he had made little academic progress in the past two years. After looking at the records, none of which gave a favorable impression of the boy, Mr. L. said that he would accept him on a trial basis. However, he wanted the court representative, the class adviser, the home-room teacher, and the boy to meet him for a joint conference so that the conditions of his acceptance would be clear to all. The court representative remarked that if the boy couldn't get along at this school, he couldn't get along in any school. Mr. L. replied that he was always willing to give a youngster a chance, but he would not jeopardize the welfare of the whole student body by keeping a student who didn't get along.

I have pictured this principal at work with a student, a teacher, a staff administrator, and an attendance officer. However, I have not conveyed any impression of the number of contacts and the number of decisions that he must make, particularly at the beginning of each day before classes start. I have seen him confer with an English teacher about the policy of requiring book reports and then with the custodian about the flag rope before he reached his office. I have seen him take two or three phone calls from parents before he had a chance to take off his coat. When he finally reached his desk and sat down, the parade began. The coach needed one more bus to take his

football boys to a game and a faculty member to work as time-keeper for the intramural games held three nights a week. A teacher asked him to order a key for the file cabinet in the lounge—the only key had disappeared. The fire marshal arranged for a fire drill. A business man asked that the principal serve as a discussion leader at the next meeting of the Kiwanis Club. A teacher asked the principal to have someone cover a class for him so that he could appear in juvenile court. A special education teacher, new to the system, presented the organizational plans for his group and also made arrangements for his youngsters to have their pictures taken for the school records. The commercial teacher reported that equipment ordered in August had not yet arrived. The ninth-grade adviser had the announcements for the day approved. Then the bell rang, and the principal was free to start on his scheduled activities for the day.

So many people, so many problems, so many decisions in so little time! But to Mr. L. they were the routine matters of being a secondary-school principal. The ease with which he dealt with people was the result of years of experience governed by a deep regard for the welfare of each child. His decisions were based on a genuine interest in the problems of people and a sincere desire to be of service.