

B R E A K I N G R A N K S ®



10 Skills for Successful School Leaders

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF SECONDARY SCHOOL
PRINCIPALS 

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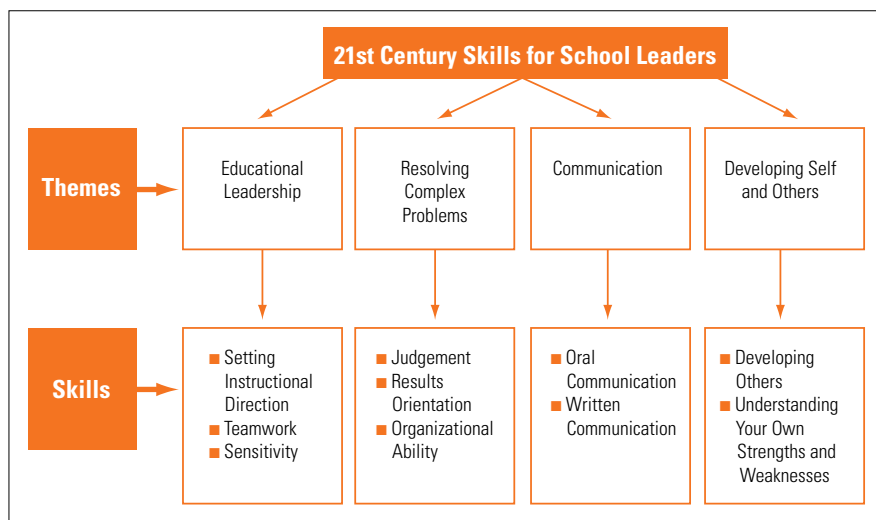
Every school leader should regularly ask the question: “What impact do I have on my school’s success through my knowledge, skills, and dispositions—not simply through the programs I’ve helped initiate?” Too often, principals share best practices with colleagues in terms of programs and approaches to leading, but never get around to reflecting on and discussing the personal ingredients for their success, or their strengths or weaknesses—which more often than not are the very things that enabled a best practice to be successfully adopted.

For more than three decades, NASSP has been assessing and studying the skills of school leaders. As a result of this experience, a job analysis of the principalship, observation, and research, NASSP has identified 10 skills that encompass the bulk of what school leadership entails. This guide details those skills and provides discrete, observable, and measurable behaviors.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the 10 skills, which have been divided into four themes: educational leadership, resolving complex problems, communication, and developing self and others.

Each theme and the associated skills and behaviors are explored in depth. To help you to understand the concepts more fully and to conduct that analysis methodically, each skill is divided into four subsections:

- A definition of the term
- Behavioral indicators and descriptors of practice
- Personal development tools and activities that can help you practice the skill to build capacity and effectiveness
- Examples of other school leaders putting the behaviors in action.



Ways to Use This Guide

As an individual. Every professional assumes final responsibility for his or her own professional development. Although some reliance on others for providing growth experiences is necessary, each person will benefit from reflection on how skills, knowledge, and attitudes in his or her own performance contribute to success or failure of self and the school. Often, we look inward to attribute our success and outward to explain failures. This guide encourages honest reflection and recommends the practice of specific behaviors to develop habits that contribute to effective performance.

To guide a mentor/protégé relationship. Many successful leaders credit an effective coach or mentor as one important contributor to building the capacity that led to their success. Effective leaders accept coaching for their own development and then develop the capacity to coach and develop others. Developing skills as a focus for coaching has a strong foundation in any activity that requires performance of complex tasks—school leadership is a complex occupation that requires constant integration of a broad set of skills as well as knowledge and dispositions.

With aspiring leader cohorts or in a principal preparation course. In asking thousands of school leaders the question, “How did you get to be as good as you are?” NASSP staff members seldom hear a response that indicates that preparation programs and activities have done more than develop a knowledge base. By including the development of essential skills for effective performance, leadership preparation encompasses application, evaluation, and synthesis of knowledge in the context of practice in simulations or on the job.

To help build individualized developmental activities for an internship. “What do we want to accomplish during this internship? You have so much to learn and I have so much to teach you.” This is often the way that internships work. A more effective model of an internship is one in which the intern has opportunities to apply and practice what has been learned in a real-life context. This requires the incorporation of skill development into the experience.

What Will I Take Away From This Guide?

The NASSP assessment and development model has been rigorously tested and refined during the past three decades on the basis of leadership principles and the experience of principals. School leaders using this guide should:

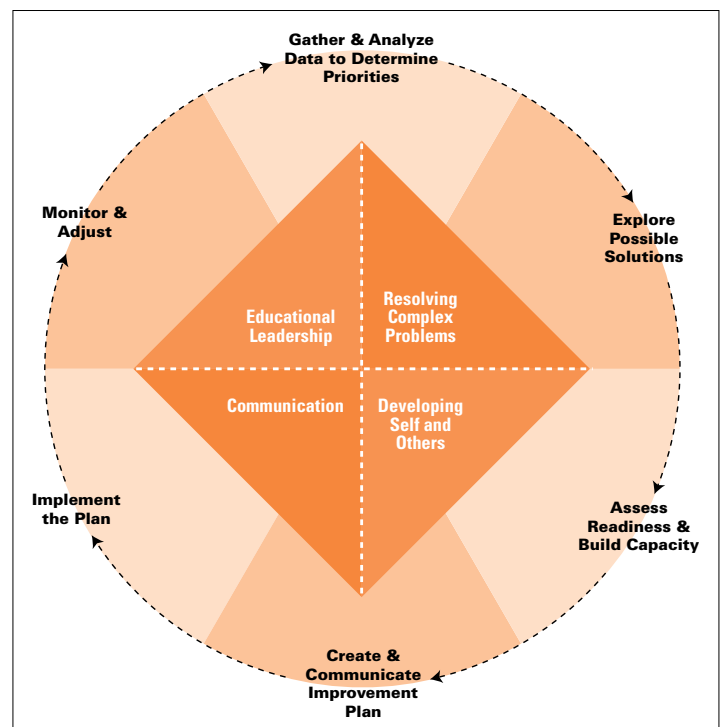
- Understand the skill dimensions that contribute to effective school leadership
- Understand the behaviors that contribute to a high level of performance in each of the skill dimensions
- Understand the skills required to accurately reflect on their own behavior
- Understand how to collect feedback and other data about their own behavior, analyze it, and take action to improve based on the analysis
- Understand how to use the information from their skills diagnosis to construct a professional development plan with goals for development, strategies for finding excellent models, opportunities to practice, methods to obtain constructive feedback, and systems to evaluate progress and revise the plan accordingly.

Regularly reflecting on and practicing the skills presented in this guide should be the responsibility of all school leaders:

- Veteran principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders
- Principals looking to develop leadership capacity within their staff members
- Mentors of new and aspiring leaders
- New principals
- Aspiring principals and other school leaders
- Principals and other leaders at schools that are not reaching the school's potential
- University staff members charged with preparing principals and teachers.

We ask students to learn for the sake of learning and self-improvement. We assess students in knowledge and the use of skills—and help them understand their strengths and weaknesses so that they can work to improve them. Isn't it only fair that school leaders model that behavior in their professional lives?

The recent work that NASSP has done in the area of school reform is designed to change the status quo—in the school, in the classroom, and within each school leader. *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* each provided recommendations to help schools tackle the “what” of school reform. *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change* addressed the “how” of fostering change through a process. The goal of this guide is to help each school leader assess his or her knowledge, skills, and dispositions for leading change by examining and practicing 10 leadership skills. Only by doing so can a leader be prepared to take the “what” and the “how” of school change and put them into effective practice so that all students learn and grow.



For each of the 10 skills, readers are asked to complete four activities: reflect on their performance; seek feedback from colleagues; complete a customized chart, based on the following sample, that walks them through the steps of the process circle; and identify behaviors from practitioner interviews.

Process Circle Step	How Do <i>You</i> Put the Skill Into Action?
Gather & Analyze Data	<p>Ask: How is my on-the-job performance in this skill area?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reflect on my performance of the behavioral indicators for the skill—the frequency with which I engage in each behavior as opposed to my ability to perform the behavior. ■ Solicit face-to-face feedback from a variety of sources—such as a mentor, a coach, a supervisor, supervisees, and colleagues—that focuses on the skill indicators. ■ Seek anonymous feedback from the 360-degree tool available from NASSP (www.principals.org). ■ Seek data from a formal assessment process (e.g., Selecting and Developing 21st Century Leaders and Leadership Skills Assessments from NASSP). ■ Review my performance on the indicators. Discuss results with mentor or colleague.
Possible Solutions & Strategies	<p>Assignments that stretch and provide practice in this skill: [customized for each skill]</p> <hr/> <p>Workshops, seminars, and courses:</p> <hr/> <p>Mentor, coaches, and supervisors:</p> <hr/> <p>Readings:</p> <hr/> <p>Off-the-job development opportunities:</p> <hr/> <p>NASSP resources:</p> <hr/>
Assess Readiness & Build Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review the possible solutions in light of school data that has implications for my professional development needs: achievement; instructional staff members’ qualifications, experience, background, and so on; student, staff member, and school community demographics; attendance; dropout rate; graduation rate and so on. <p>Ask: What development can I engage in that will have the greatest impact on my personal/professional capacity and the needs of the school? Consider how specific personal development activities will affect others with whom you work.</p>
Create & Communicate Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop a personal learning plan (PLP) that delineates how you will practice this skill, your development activities, and goals. ■ Be an example of a head learner by sharing your PLP with others and encouraging every adult in the school to have a learning plan that is based on their developmental needs in the context of the needs of the school and the students.
Implement Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Practice the indicators to build capacity in the skill: implement the strategies selected from possible solutions.
Monitor & Adjust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Take continuous measures of your progress and the impact of your progress on the needs of your school as you practice. ■ Refer to the data sources that formed the basis of your development plan (PLP). ■ Seek feedback from colleagues, peers, mentors, supervisors—and remember the PLP is public. ■ Reflect ■ Keep a journal ■ Return to Gather & Analyze Data to establish new priorities either within the same skill or to begin work on another skill.