

ADMINISTRATIVE APPLICATION OF INTEGRATIVE THINKING*

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Abstract

This document details the process of integrative thinking with descriptions of its four components. Two specific uses of integrative thinking are then proposed for use by school administrators. Those uses are with master school scheduling and NCLB testing requirements.

Integrative Thinking: An Advantage for Education Administrators

What makes some people successful, admirable, and wealthy? Did they make the dean's list throughout college? Do they possess an inherent skill to understand everything and always find the best solutions to problems without difficulty? After reading the article by Roger Martin, *How Successful Leaders Think*, one may realize that some accomplished leaders most likely do have an advantage while working their way up the ladder of success. A possible advantage is the use of integrative thinking.

Over 60 years ago, F. Scott Fitzgerald recognized that highly intelligent individuals had an ability to manage two or more completely different ideas in their heads at one time, sift through the opposing attributes of each, and then weave together the best of all features to produce one resolution superior to any of the individual contributing ideas (Martin, 2007). At that particular time, however, the skill didn't have a name. Today it is called integrative thinking. An unusual fact is that most successful people aren't aware of their ability to be integrative thinkers. It's a skill that comes naturally for them. Luckily for those not endowed with such skill, integrative thinking can be learned.

Integrative thinking is a process of four steps. As it begins, the integrative thinker takes into consideration any and all possible factors involved in the problem or conflict. Possibilities aren't limited to only two or three variables. Even if some of them are direct opposites and have the potential to cause stress and dissension, the integrative thinker is able to manage extreme situations simultaneously. Next, he begins to sort through them and find multidirectional and nonlinear relationships among the factors. The integrative thinker will look at the entire scenario and not limit options to only one choice. The third step involves making a decision or proposing a viable solution for the problem. The integrative thinker alone considers the entire problem with all its factors and how possible solutions will affect each other. This information remains in the problem solver's mind only and is not dealt out to others for their interjections. The final step of the process is achieving the resolution. At this point, the problem area or tension is resolved and creative outcomes emerge. Instead of one point-blank solution being offered, several creative solutions to address the original conflict are available, and the most favored can be applied.

Integrative thinking can be a valuable skill for school administrators. Not all decisions made during the course of a school term can be settled by simple yes-no answers. Administrators must be able to take into

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consideration many factors, integrate them into several different scenarios, and then apply the best solution to the problem at hand. A master schedule for an entire school is an excellent example. With current NCLB requirements, administrators must structure their curriculum and faculty in the best way possible to meet the needs of the students. First, strengths and weaknesses for the population of an entire grade level must be evaluated for the various achievement levels. The number and types of classes are decided upon based on that data. Second, a master schedule encompassing all core subjects, electives, special education and remedial classes must be devised. This task alone requires extreme attention and flexibility of thought by the administrator. In other words, integrative thinking can enable him to accomplish this task much easier and without great stress. When the master schedule is complete, staff members can be placed in specific jobs depending upon qualifications. Potential vacancies and possible staff changes can be ascertained. When the entire process is completed, a full, working master schedule should result. An advantage integrative thinking proposes during this scheduling process is that changes can be made to the final project if necessary. Integrative thinkers do not work towards only one specific solution.

Another situation in which an education administrator can optimize integrative thinking involves all stakeholders and NCLB testing requirements. With increasing pressure on individual schools to gain accreditation by achieving specific scores based on a variety of criteria, administrators are under a great deal of pressure to meet expectations. To do so, they must stay abreast of and coordinate their own administrative responsibilities in relation to the educational responsibilities of the faculty, students, parents, district authorities, and the community (Starratt, 2004). The entire situation is complex because a plan must be implemented that addresses the concerns and incorporates test scores and school accreditation. By applying integrative thought processes, an administrator can assimilate numerous factors into an applicable plan for moving the entire school population in a direction that will produce positive results.

Integrative thinking may not be the buzz word in today's educational area, but it is definitely a process that can prove efficient if used by school administrators. Class scheduling and NCLB accreditation goals are only two areas in which this process can be applied. Administrators who are open-minded and able to see the 'big picture' in their own educational situations can apply integrative thinking skills daily to aid them in planning and decision making activities.

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