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7 Habits of Highly Effective Tech-leading Principals

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Patrick Larkin, principal of Burlington High School in Burlington, MA, started a 1-to-1 iPad initiative in the fall of 2012.

The conventional wisdom in education is that any school reform--be it curriculum, instruction, assessment, or teacher professionalism--is most likely to take hold in schools that have strong leadership. The same holds true for technology. Any educator will tell you the most successful implementation of technology programs takes place in schools where the principal sees him or herself as a technology leader.

"The role of the principal is one of facilitation and modeling behavior," remarks Robert Farrace, senior director of communications and development with the [National Association of Secondary School Principals](#). "The principal who models these behaviors is going to be able to inspire innovation in their school much more effectively than a principal who simply requires that teachers use technology, or collaborate, or take risks."

T.H.E. Journal recently surveyed principals from across the country to identify the attributes they think a principal who wants to be an effective technology leader should demonstrate. The consensus settled on the seven attributes most frequently mentioned. They constitute our list of "Seven Habits." At the same time, we solicited Farrace's expert insight into why each of these habits is important.

We then spoke with three highly effective technology leaders among the ranks of principals to see how these habits have led to the successful implementation of educational technology in their schools. Patrick Larkin, of [Burlington High School](#) in Burlington, MA, and Eric Sheneringer, of [New Milford High School](#) in New Milford, NJ, were recently recognized as NASSP Digital Principals. Lyn Hilt is both the principal and technology integrator at [Brecknock Elementary School](#) in Denver, PA. She and Larkin [will speak](#) on the topic of 21st century leadership at ISTE 2012.

1. Create an Atmosphere That Inspires Innovation

The Expert's Perspective:

Robert Farrace: "Guiding the culture of the school is one of the most important things that a principal has to do. Unfortunately, it's also the most difficult. A lot of principals are stuck by the question, 'How do I get from where I am to where I want the school to be?'"

"How do you go about moving a collective set of values and beliefs that a faculty has built up in a school over years, perhaps even generations? What steps do you need to take to move that toward the kind of culture that allows for innovation?"

The Habit in Action:

"Our mission statement clearly says that we teach responsible citizenship and lifelong learning," explains Patrick Larkin. "I don't think that you can teach responsible citizenship in the year 2012 if you're ignoring digital citizenship and the use of technology." Yet, as recently as 2007, Larkin's Burlington High School in Burlington, MA, didn't allow students to access web-enabled mobile devices during the school day.

"I had teachers coming to me and saying they'd like to use student-owned mobile devices in the classroom, but right now it's against our school policy, and they didn't want to break that policy," recalls Larkin. "I don't think it was a conscious decision by school administrators to say, 'I don't trust my teachers,' but that's what you're saying when you restrict technology."

He knew, as principal of the school, he had to do something. "Our job as administrators is to provide the resources that will help our teachers do their job," Larkin says.

He adjusted school policy, allowing students to access mobile devices at their teachers' discretion, and began offering his staff ongoing professional development and conversations on best practices for using these tools in the classroom. That was a precursor to the implementation of a 1-to-1 iPad 2 initiative at the start of the 2012 school year. Now every student at Burlington has 24/7 access to a portable web-enabled device.

"I don't think my job is that complicated," remarks Larkin. "My job is to provide resources for teachers and to listen to teachers. Hire good teachers, see what they need, and then get it into their classrooms. When you have people saying that something would be a really great opportunity for us, but right now the policy says otherwise, why should we block that opportunity?"

Eric Sheneringer, of New Milford High School in New Milford, NJ, says of his

Principals

Lyn Hilt

Principal and Technology Integrator
Brecknock Elementary School
Denver, PA
[@L_Hilt](#)
Blog: [The Principal's Posts](#)

Patrick Larkin

Principal
Burlington High School
Burlington, MA
[@bhsprincipal](#)
Blog: [Burlington High School Principal's Blog](#)

Eric Sheneringer

Principal
New Milford High School
New Milford, NJ
[@NMHS_Principal](#)

school, "If we're not trying new things, we're not learning. And if we're trying new things, then we're going to fail sometimes. It's creating an environment where my teachers are afforded a certain level of autonomy, but in turn, I need to be more flexible."

Blog: [A Principal's Perspective](#)

2. Foster Collaboration

The Expert's Perspective:

Farrace: "Teaching is no longer an isolated profession. When I go into schools today, I'm continually struck by how different they are in one regard in particular from the way they were many years ago: Teachers are consistently working more collaboratively than we did when I was teaching."

"Teaching was a very isolated thing. You would close your door and do your own thing. If you happened to speak with another teacher during the course of the day, it was a bonus. What we have today are schools that are far more collaborative. We can attribute that in large part to principals who are leading that collaboration in their school."

"We're seeing some pretty good things happen as a result. Teachers need to be continually learning, and they are not going to learn if they remain in a bubble all day. So, they are constantly sharing with one another. That kind of professional learning really begins with the principal."

The Habit in Action:

"One of the things we have to teach our students is how to be collaborative, not just with each other, but on a large scale using digital tools," remarks Larkin. "If the adults in the building aren't collaborating with each other and having these open conversations using tools like Twitter, then it's not going to translate down to our students."

After successfully building his own professional learning network through Twitter and discovering education-focused Twitter communities like [#EdChat](#), Larkin wanted to share the potential of Twitter as a collaborative networking tool with his teachers. Two years ago he had his teachers create Twitter handles and post updates and follow along during Burlington's professional development days using the hashtag [#BHSChat](#), in the hopes that they would see Twitter's potential for sharing and collaborating beyond the walls of their school.

Many of Larkin's teachers have since built up robust professional learning networks on Twitter, and Larkin, his teachers, and his students are using the [#BHSChat](#) hashtag to share resources with Twitter users around the globe.

"It's already a step forward to have our own teachers share their best practices within our building," remarks Larkin, "but then when you open the door to tools like Twitter, they can share best practices and learn from teachers all over the world. I think a lot of times for teachers that have lived a solitary existence, unfortunately, in the vacuum of their school, they just want to see that something can work in the classroom before they try it for themselves. Then they see the excitement from kids, and from there it just builds and it's contagious."

3. Be Open to New Ideas

The Expert's Perspective

Farrace: "This is really tied in to the collaboration piece. The job of running a school is too big for any one person. It has to be distributed. Be open to the notion that good ideas can come from anywhere, that not all of the good ideas can come from the principal."

"It's the principal's job to get everybody in the school involved and invested in a new vision for the school and to demonstrate to them that their input is valued. The two of those feed off of one another. More collaboration contributes to a more solid culture that allows the kind of innovation and vision that all of us are really aspiring to. Great ideas are going to bubble up and sometimes the smartest thing a principal can do is provide support for a teacher with a good idea and then get out of their way and let them do it."

The Habit in Action:

In her second year at Brecknock Elementary School in Denver, PA, Lynn Hilt created a districtwide elementary technology cohort group that meets regularly after school hours to learn more about integrating technology into their curricula, discover new tools, and share new ideas on using technology in the classroom. "I think these tech trainings have helped shape a really strong team of technology integrators in our school," remarks Hilt.

Hilt says she routinely has been surprised by the way her elementary school teachers use technology both in their classrooms and as a tool to support collaboration with their fellow teachers. "They're finding a lot of unique ways to find the tools that I've introduced," she remarks. "They run with it. They know their curriculum, they know their kids, and they're doing really great things."

She says one of her kindergarten students recently went on an extended trip to Peru with his family. His teacher arranged for him to keep in touch with his classmates via Skype. "That's something I didn't think of," Hilt says, "but I think it's a fantastic use of that tool."

She has reading groups throughout the school in which teachers are using Google Docs to organize their entire reading blocks. "That really impressed me, because I never asked them to do that," Hilt says. "I never gave them any templates for doing that. They just did it organically once they became comfortable with the tool."

4. Be a Connected Learner Yourself**The Expert's Perspective:**

Farrace: "For many principals, their biggest fear is of not knowing something or of appearing ignorant. Nothing inspires that fear more than technology. The irony is they have a long history of leading all kinds of initiatives where they don't have the technical knowledge: ELL, special ed, schoolwide literacy programs.

"Principals by and large don't have the specific technical knowledge to be leading those, but they've been successfully leading them for generations. What we need for principals to understand is, first, it's okay to admit that they don't know everything. What's important is that they commit to the learning of technology, and the sharing of that learning as widely as they can.

"That kind of commitment to being a connected learner is one of the consistent traits that you'll see in principals who are doing a good job of leading technology in their schools. In fact, those principals will probably admit that they don't consider themselves to be techies. Their commitment remains to the learning of the students in their school, and this technology stuff is a big contributor to that. They're committed to learning everything that they can about the ways that technology can contribute to their students' learning."

The Habit in Action:

"If I can pinpoint the catalyst for all of the change and transformation that's taken place in my school, none of it happened until I became a connected learner," remarks Sheninger. "I had no idea what the term web 2.0 was. I had no idea that social media could be harnessed for learning. I was ignorant because I was not educated. Once I started learning from other educators who were doing other things with technology, I quickly learned how much I didn't know."

When Sheninger joined Twitter in early 2009, there were no how-to manuals or best practices to guide him. "I lurked and learned," he explains. "I followed a handful of educators who I'd vetted and identified as thought leaders in the field of education and technology."

Sheninger looked at who these leaders were following to further expand his network--"If [Diane Ravitch](#) or [Will Richardson](#) is following somebody, then that person is probably a good person to follow," he remarks--and used third-party applications like TweetDeck to manage his Twitter feed by categorizing the people he was following. He watched how they used Twitter--how they shared resources, how they retweeted or replied to other people's posts, how they used hashtags to assign a tweet to a specific topic--and eventually applied what he had learned by posting his own tweets and jumping into conversations on Twitter. Today, he can count more than 21,000 followers and

growing.

Sheninger started to model not just his expectations for his teachers, but also practical methods of integrating digital tools to enhance and support curriculum. "I found that if I was not up there front and center, working with my teachers, showing them that I truly had a vested interest in the utilization of these tools to engage students, to increase achievement, to make learning more relevant and meaningful, the initiatives would not take hold or be embraced," explains Sheninger.

"As a leader I should not have to sell my staff on ways to improve and get better," he adds. "I want them to truly see the value in these shifts. I'm now sitting back with a smile on my face, watching my teachers take the lead and move us forward. But it wasn't until I actually started meeting with teachers, taking a hands-on approach, and showing them simply that if I can do this, and if I can give them some simple ideas on how to incorporate technology, then you can go from that starting point and really think of more practical ways to integrate these tools into your lessons."

5. Locate and Provide Adequate Resources

The Expert's Perspective:

Farrace: "Nobody should be going to the board of ed saying we're going to get iPads for every student. That's not the headline. The headline is that we are committing ourselves to preparing students for the world into which they are entering, and that involves getting students more involved in using social technologies in education, using networking technologies in education.

"That has to include 1-to-1, and that has to include connective technologies, the ability to collaborate with people across time and space. Unfortunately, all that people tend to see is that they're going to get a whole bunch of really cool flashy high-res iPad 3's in the school. Yes, these devices are really cool, but that's not the headline.

"It really is about the learning. When you speak with tech-leading principals, they will echo that. It's not fundamentally about the technology. It's about the technology supporting what these learning goals are. As Patrick Larkin is fond of saying: You look at the mission statement of the school, and you want to create learners for this age and you want to create citizens who are ready to be contributors in this world. If you're doing this for the 21st century, it really does have to include this stuff.

"Unfortunately, finding the funding for these initiatives is really, really hard. Principals have to become experts at doing more with less. I wish there were a formula and I'm always looking for a way to share with principals where resources might be. These are difficult budget times. I don't have a formula except to say that principals have gotten very creative about where they find the money."

The Habit in Action:

Funding Burlington High's iPad initiative required that Larkin "think different." For him, that meant combing through past budgets to find areas that no longer needed to be funded once the iPads were in students' hands. "We decided that we were buying no new sets of textbooks," explains Larkin. "Instead of paying for a new history textbook for 250 10th-graders at \$100 apiece, we're providing teachers a lot of support and training to find online resources to supplement their curriculum."

He decided that he no longer needed to worry about maintaining computer labs for word processing and research because students would be able to do that anywhere in the building with their iPads. Plans were in place to install a new \$100,000 foreign languages lab--until Larkin learned AP students could use iPads to record the oral segments of their College Board exams. "We realized once we had the iPads, we'd have a foreign language lab in every classroom," he says.

Sheninger's Personal Learning Network has been key to providing his teachers with adequate resources. For example, after a colleague he met through his PLN put him in touch with a representative at [AVerMedia](#), he was able

to negotiate a deal for AVerMedia to provide free document cameras and digital response pens to his school, along with professional development on how to integrate the equipment into the classroom. His teachers now use the cameras to record mini-lessons, which they upload via YouTube to their personal Google sites so students can review the day's material outside of class.

"If I have these lofty expectations of how I want teachers to incorporate technology, I need to make sure that I support them with the appropriate hardware, software, and professional development to make that happen," remarks Sheninger. "My rule of thumb is I will give my teachers whatever they want. No request is too lofty. It's my job to try to accommodate that request so that they can do their job, which is combining sound pedagogy with the integration of technology."

But locating and providing adequate resources goes beyond hardware and software procurement. In response to what he felt was a weak professional development landscape for web 2.0 integration, Sheninger created the Edscape Conference, now in its third year. The one-day conference is free for every teacher in Sheninger's district, and educators from other districts can attend for a small fee. He reaches out to innovative educators in both his PLN and his own school to run sessions.

"We have seen a dramatic shift in pedagogy and technology integration since starting this conference, because teachers are realizing that it's not that hard to integrate a lot of these web 2.0 tools, and they're also being provided with the foundation they need to get started," explains Sheninger.

6. Take Risks

The Expert's Perspective:

Farrace: "There really has to be a concerted effort on the part of the principal to allow the faculty to believe that risk-taking is okay. Taking it a step further, the principal really has to go out of his or her way to build the capacity of teachers to think more broadly and to take a chance. Of course, the question is always what could possibly go wrong?"

"The fact is, what could go wrong? What is the worst-case scenario in this risk that you're taking, and do you have the capacity to absorb whatever could possibly go wrong? Think it through: Where could this initiative take a bad turn? How could we anticipate that? How are we prepared to deal with it if it does?"

"All of these things aren't deal killers, they're just obstacles. They're considerations. If the principal is in place to help teachers take those risks, you're going to see a lot more risk-taking going on in the school. Risks are really just opportunities. When you frame a risk as an opportunity, then, yeah, of course you want to be taking advantage of it."

The Habit in Action:

Is there anything educators see as more risky than allowing students to access their mobile devices during the school day? Sheninger's high school is in a blue-collar community; the district couldn't afford to implement a 1-to-1 initiative. Still, many students had personal mobile devices that remained in their pockets all day, and access to portable computing devices, such as tablets or laptops, that remained at home during school hours.

"As I started to learn from other educators in my PLN, I became much more sensitive to the fact that student-owned devices could be a powerful tool for learning," explains Sheninger. Through Twitter, Sheninger consulted with educators who had implemented student-owned technology initiatives and identified areas of opportunity and areas of difficulty for this type of initiative. One challenge recognized by those in his PLN was equity: Ensuring that all students had access to technology when they didn't all have their own technology to bring to school.

"Our challenge was to figure out ways to make sure this was as equitable as possible," explains Sheninger, "because we knew that we weren't going to let that be an excuse not to move forward."

Sheninger worked with teachers on how to create an equitable BYOT environment through cooperative grouping, and through anonymously surveying students on which devices they'd bring to class if they could, so they could prepare

lessons that took advantage of the technology that students would bring. Sheninger's school officially launched its BYOT program for ninth- through 12th-graders in September 2011.

"We're now doing unannounced observations and walk-throughs, and teachers are routinely integrating student-owned technology into their curriculum," explains Sheninger. "It's fantastic."

7. Have a Visionary Focus

The Expert's Perspective:

Farrace: "Allow the work to be focused by your vision, because there are a million different things that are crossing the principal's desk every day. What is the stuff that matters? The stuff that matters is the stuff that's really going to contribute to your students' learning.

"You see where your school is. Those things that you focus your time on, that you encourage your teachers to focus their time on, and that you are modeling are really those things that are contributing to the fundamental vision of what you want student learning to look like in your school. What is it that you want your students to know, and to be able to do, and to be thinking when they leave your school? That is the vision, and that vision dictates the culture you create in your school."

The Habit in Action:

When Hilt became the principal at Brecknock Elementary School four years ago, she inherited a school where educational technology was an afterthought. "There were interactive whiteboards in every classroom," she notes by way of example, "but very few of them were being used interactively throughout the day." Noting that whiteboards can perpetuate a teacher-centric approach to learning, she believes that "we need to get the resources into kids' hands."

Hilt's vision transformed the elementary school into a student-centered learning environment. Every initiative that's been implemented since Hilt took the reins, from the creation of a districtwide elementary technology cohort group to the acquisition of mobile learning carts, has been geared toward the goal of creating an environment where students are empowered in their learning with hands-on technology.

"I think teachers see a lot of positive rewards out of the projects that their students are creating or the research that they're doing," she says. "They see the 'aha' moments in the writing that they're doing on their blogs, and they've been encouraged to then find more ways to use technology to support their curriculum."

Hilt's vision for her school reflects the growing ubiquity of technology in students' lives. "In most cases, our students are exposed to technology before they get to us," explains Hilt. "I hate to think of school of being a step backward, of being a place where we're asking kids to power down as opposed to using these tools for their learning. We have the luxury now of having the tools in our building. To not use them in a meaningful way is a disservice to the kids.

"We have to model how to appropriately use these tools, how to have a positive digital footprint, and this is all part of the new literacy. If we're asking our kids to be literate as far as reading and writing, we need to consider other types of literacy. They need to know how to communicate with other people in the world. As part of that communication piece, technology is essential. If we're not encouraging that, then we're failing them."

NASSP's 10 Steps to Using Technology Successfully

On behalf of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Chris Toy, a former Maine principal, current educational consultant, and one of the current moderators of the [Association for Middle Level](#)

[Education's MiddleTalk listserve](#), prepared the following 10 guidelines to help principals and other school leaders succeed in integrating 21st century learning technology in their schools. This list is derived from conversations with teachers, students and parents from around the country.

1. Principals must effectively and consistently model the use of the same technology tools they expect teachers to use in their classrooms with the students.
2. Principals must be consistent in their decisions and expectations about integrating learning technology in the school.
3. The principal's communication about the pace and process of integrating learning technology needs to be clear and reasonable.
4. The principal must provide appropriate professional development time and resources to support effective classroom implementation of technology.
5. The principal must support early adopters and risk takers.
6. The principal must do whatever it takes to ensure that all staff has early access to the very same digital tools that students will be using in their classrooms.
7. As the educational leader, the principal must make it clear to the technology leader that all decisions relating to learning technology will be made by the educational leaders with input from the technology leaders, not the other way around.
8. The principal must set and support the expectation that student work will be done and stored using technology.
9. Principals must ensure that families and the public are kept informed about the school's goals and progress relating to its use of technology as a learning resource.
10. The principal must be an active and public champion for all students, staff members, and the school in moving the vision of fully integrating learning technology for the second decade of the 21st century.

About the Author

Jennifer Demski is a freelance writer in Brooklyn, NY.