

Interview with Mr. V.

Partner introduction:

Mr. V leads a school in a rather challenging environment. I knew him since I was one of the trainers providing a group of school principal candidates with leadership training. I noticed him among other training participants. That time he was a deputy school principal in one of large schools located in one of villages near Baku. He was calm, not talkative, but very focused and responsible. His input was always thoughtful and meaningful. He seemed to be open to innovative approaches and ideas. He seemed to be different from some of other participants in that way. I remember him as dedicated and passionate about education. That's why when I was thinking of school principals to be interviewed for the CELL project, I thought of him. I recommended to Farhad, a colleague of mine, to interview him. Since some interview questions were evaluative of the school leadership training I taught, I thought it was also ethically correct.

Transcription of the interview

Respondent: **Mr. V (V)**
Principal of the Secondary School in a village near Baku

Interviewer: **Dr. Farhad (F)**
Assistant Professor, ADA University

Date: **July 11, 2019**

Duration: **1 hour and 24 minutes**

F: Can you recall your school memory? Did you like your school? What were your favorite activities at school? What kind of activities did you enjoy at school?

V: I still remember my school years, and my memories predominantly are positive. One of my favorite lessons since 6-7th years at school were History lessons. I did not participate in some kind of additional or specific activities during my school years. As a schoolboy I never broke any rules at school even though I was not a quiet kid per se. Moreover, I have to admit that often I was quite naughty, as so many children were at that time and are now. I have to confess that approximately until my 6th year at school I was not a diligent and responsible schoolboy as one was supposed to be. My attitude to lessons was not serious enough. It was more an automatic utilitarian approach: superficial and shallow. At that time we almost always knew beforehand at which lesson and who would be asked and did our homework accordingly only when we knew that it was our turn coming to speak or to be asked at lessons. But in 7th grade a new History teacher had come to our school. Being very enthusiastic teacher and a knowledgeable person, she had sparked my interest for learning not only in her own field but also in general. Her example proved to me for the first time (later I had many proofs of that kind) that children start to love learning certain disciplines predominantly (perhaps only) because of teachers' enthusiasm and teachers' ability to present information in an interesting and attractive way for learners. Of course one can make children to learn by means of pushing them hard and/or applying administrative resources or pressure. But in my opinion and based on my experience I do not think that this way is an effective one. It can be effective only for some period of time but it will never stimulate children's interest from the depth. It is quite a superficial approach to teaching in my opinion. Generally speaking, I have good memories about my school years and experience I had gained at that time.

F: Describe your school life/experience? How was it? What about teachers? What about your school principal? What kind of memory do you keep on them?

V: I have only positive memories of my teachers and principals, even though in my time the majority of teachers was quite cold and extremely official in their approach and communication with children. I also remember that in my 1st grade I had a slap from my principal for participation in a fight which took place between first graders of Azerbaijani and Russian sectors of my school. Despite this episode I still remember both my principal and teachers in a very positive way. I think that even despite some coldness and probably to a certain extent some roughness they were right.

F: How did your early educational experience shape you as a leader?

V: I would say I did not have any leadership experience during my school years. My first leadership lessons, my first influences in this sphere and my first understandings of 'leadership' itself I had while studying at university and later after I had started to accumulate my own professional experience. During my school years I was not a leader. I mean I was not a kind of a kid willing to be a leader at school. I tried to study while at school but I never was the best pupil or a leader of my grade. I would say that at school I was an average in-between. I never even thought about being a leader at school.

F: How did your family experiences shape you as a leader?

V: Recalling my childhood years and my family I have to admit that the person who helped me a lot in terms of becoming a good person, a leader, and the one who knows his goals and how to reach them was my mother. Obviously my family was quite patriarchal. My father was an absolute and unconditional head of family. His decisions and opinions could never be discussed or challenged. I would even say that I could communicate with him only or at least in a total majority of cases only by means of my mother's mediation. I remember that every time I wanted to bring something important to the notice of my father I had to do it via my mother, First I was describing her the situation to have her advice as to how and in which key the issue should be presented to my father so that I could hope for some kind of positive reaction.

F: What was your home life like when you were a child? What was your parents' parenting style? What kind of values did your parents have?

V: My mother worked in a local communist party committee. She was an average staff member there. My father worked in the field of taxes and finances. Generally speaking, my parents taught me quite important and at the same time simple things. For example, I remember they always were telling me that whatever was happening between adults, between my parents and our neighbors or other adults I must never interfere and must always be outside of any conflict being polite with other people even if they had conflict with my parents. Also, as in many other families, all the moral rules I was taught first of all by my parents. In my life choices they did not push me. Only once when I was applying for history faculty my father told me that instead of being a historian I could consider becoming a dentist. His argument at that time was that dentists were well-paid and always could find some source for making money if compared to a historian. Generally speaking, I would describe their parenting style as conservative. I think it was the only parenting style applied in families all over Azerbaijan at that time. Even today, except in the capital city, in all the regions of Azerbaijan this parenting style still is the most often applied in families.

F: How was education valued in your family? What was the education level in last three generations of your family?

V: First educated representatives of my family were my father and mother. Generally speaking, before the Soviet period my relatives were uneducated, I mean my grandfathers and grandmothers. Speaking about my father and mother I can say that they always tried to stimulate in me the willingness to learn and to study. I guess it was some kind of 'trend' at that time. It was the result of Soviet propaganda stressing necessity of education and literacy. I do not mean that all families were like that but in my family my parents were always trying to explain to me that having education was of utmost importance. Also it was obvious at that time that without higher education you could not have a good career in the communist party, in science, in other fields.

F: Who had the biggest influence on you growing up? Why?

V: As I mentioned before, I liked my History teacher at school for her enthusiasm. But first of all of course I must mention my mother. She was my first advisor in terms of education and career planning. I could always ask her for advice and she always had it. Unfortunately, I could not have such an experience with my father due to the reasons which I had already mentioned. He was very conservative in his approach to leading the family and had always kept a distance between himself and other members of family. So my biggest influence in the course of my growing up was my mother.

F: What is your perception of yourself as a leader?

V: Well, it is hard to say... Let me think... I guess my leadership style and my perception of myself as a leader started from my first years of professional experience. I think that my ability to be patient, communicative, sociable and open for discussions is a key element of me as a leader. I am not emotional in communication, preferring to be more “cold-minded” and patient.

F: How successful are you in communication with others as a principal?

V: I guess I am very successful. According to recent monitoring by the supervising agencies our school during last 4 years was the only school without any justified complaints and appeals from parents against the principal and/or school. There were a couple of complaints but upon consideration by supervising agencies they were recognized as biased and unjustified. During my first months as a principal I had encountered some problems with some of my deputies, because they were not ready and prepared to accept innovations and improvements. It made me seek support among a wider spectrum of school staff: first of all, teachers. And I succeeded with building my own team, consisting not only of my official deputies but also of different teachers who turned out to be sympathizers, associates and, generally speaking, people of the same mindset as me. And even today more than my official deputies I have support and help from my other colleagues and teachers of our school. I must say that all achievements of the school during last years are not mine but our joint achievements. Moreover, since the very first day I have been involving into cooperation pupils of 10th and 11th grades. I was at that time and I am now seeking their assistance in matters of maintaining general discipline among pupils, especially younger ones. First they were surprised with such an attitude but later, when they understood that my intentions were serious, they started to help me. As I have mentioned before I am an open-minded person, ready to listen and communicate with others. Moreover, believe it or not, there were cases when pupils were asking me for advice because they felt more comfortable communicating with me and discussing their problems with me than with their own parents. Probably for this openness to dialogue and ability to listen I can call myself a successful in communication with others as a principal.

F: How do you describe the culture in your school? How do you support it?

V: When it comes to culture, in our school our team has been always promoting general moral norms and rules. As you understand in any community there are certain peculiarities, especially in rural areas, which are more patriarchal. Special attention is paid to how people, first of all women and pupils, are dressed and behave at work. In our school we have the same approach. I would also say that all these “moral norms,” “dress code,” and behavior issues are fixed not directly by me but by the respective members of my team. First of all women, when necessary, explain to new-comers in our collective and new pupils our local rules, norms, traditions, etc. We never had any problems in this regard. During my first year at school problems from time to time occurred, conflicts between teachers and pupils. But they were always fixed on the spot by means of discussions and negotiations and with my direct participation.

F: What is the meaning of respect-based influence (power) for you?

V: This is the critical point for any leadership. Your ability to demonstrate, if you will, your superiority over others. Also subordination is extremely important. Even though I am quite liberal and open-minded in communication with my colleagues, children and other people, I nevertheless try to keep a certain distance in terms of subordination. Some people might say that I can be a bit smug sometimes but this is just my approach to building professional relations to have effective outcomes. Subordination must be strictly followed. Considering my personal experience, I would add that power (influence) in any community presupposes that no one can give to others any promises having relation to you on behalf of you. Because every member of a team, including myself, must clearly understand the scope of her/his rights and responsibilities and what s/he can and cannot do and discuss with others. That is why I think that clear understanding of one’s own rights and responsibilities are key elements to any respect based power and influence.

F: What makes you feel powerful or successful as a school leader and in general?

V: As I mentioned before, the most important thing is to establish clear norms and rules, to follow them and to ensure that everybody understands and follows these rules and norms. First you explain

and make clear to your team, your colleagues, pupils the norms, requirements, their rights and responsibilities and then you yourself follow those rules and demand the same from others.

F: How do you demonstrate your power in a school environment?

V: Well, I cannot bring any concrete example... I guess that the main way for me to demonstrate my authority at school is my norms and rules oriented approach to working process, ability to listen and to be patient. Also one of the key elements for me is to inspire. I remember that when I first started my work at this school as a principal, the teachers' approach to events like inter-school Olympiads and other inter-school competitions was quite pessimistic and passive. I often heard from them something like 'Why should we bother at all? Everything is already fixed by above authorities and everybody knows who will win,' etc. My first step was to tell them that let's try, let's do our best, let's involve our best pupils, and who knows what will happen. My enthusiasm had a multiplier effect. Pupils of our school throughout these years already had gotten golden, silver and bronze medals in different city scale and republic-scale inter-school competitions and different Olympiads. And I am proud of them and our joint achievements.

Another important point for me is to stand behind my words. If I promise something or if I take some position then I must follow it and stand behind it firmly. And in all conflicts and issues I try to be objective, not to be biased. I mean that if I receive a complaint from some parent against one of our teachers it does not mean that I will automatically be defending my colleagues. My first task in such issues is to analyze the situation from different angles and to understand positions of both sides. Only after that I make a decision. Of course it also does not mean that I always take side of parents. As I said I do my best to stay objective and neutral. For example, if parents are wrong then I will definitely stand by my colleagues.

Otherwise, I will be on the side of a parent. Or in some situations both sides turn out to be equally guilty, and in such situations I have to be very diplomatic while discussing these issues and having some consensus.

I never close the doors of my office. Day by day I meet and speak with children in school yard or corridors during breaks. I would say that as a principal I have a quite liberal and open-minded attitude toward communication with others.

F: What are the behaviors of you as a principal that help you to engage teachers, and support student achievements, involve parents?

V: From my experience I can say that one of the weakest points in the whole educational process is parents. I mean that about 78% of our school's parents are not well-educated persons (some of them had only 4 years at secondary school, others, at best, graduated from secondary school with quite modest results). You can imagine what kind of attitude to education they have and promote to their children. Parents are key elements in educational process. If their attitude to learning is kind of skeptical and inert of course it is very hard for teachers to involve children into learning process. I do not mean that nothing depends on teacher. Of course many things depend. But let's not forget that children spend more time with their parents, outside of school, and the idea of importance of education must be permanently propagated not only at school but first of all by parents.

Communicating with some parents I see that they, let's say, can spend 500 AZN on a smartphone but they do not think that with even a half of this amount they could buy new textbooks, new training manuals, new books for their children, or to pay these amounts to tutors for their children to improve their academic achievements. So I see that parents very often have other priorities and education of their children is not something of top priority for them.

Regarding my work in this direction I can say that I try to stimulate interest of children by encouraging them. In our school we have established a tradition of regularly praising pupils and teachers in different nominations. We give them presents: books, watches, etc. Of course, we cannot afford expensive items, and what we can afford is something very inexpensive.

Nevertheless, I think in such situation it is better to do something than nothing at all. And to tell the truth it had and still has an effect. Because throughout these years I see that children have started to get involved into learning with more willingness and interest, and teachers are getting more enthusiastic. So I think it is better to do everything you can in a given context rather than doing nothing and complaining.

F: How successful are you in communication with school teachers, students, parents and non-teaching school staff?

V: I think I am quite successful in this regard. As I already mentioned I am a very patient person. I do not like pushing others too hard and aggressively. I prefer discussing, consistent persuading, explaining to being aggressive straight away. This is a characteristic feature of my temperament, and it helps me to deal and communicate with people of different personality types in my work as well as in life in general, even in my own family.

F: What are your strongest features as a school leader?

V: Patience, responsibility, ability to explain to others clearly their rights and obligations, to follow the established rules and thus giving an example to others.

F: What kind of leadership skills and abilities would you like to develop and improve?

V: I would say that I would like to improve my ability to make the best, effective decisions in critical situations when you have to make decisions urgently on the spot. I would like to be able to make such decisions based on logical grounds and to choose the most effective and appropriate ones in a given critical situation.

F: What do you feel is the best incentive to motivate teachers to use student-centered learning approaches?

V: In our local context I guess the most effective instrument for motivation teachers is a principal's personal example, enthusiasm and knowledge. One more time I should mention that in our school we try to stimulate teachers to be creative by different prizes, appraisals and support.

F: What does student-centered learning look like in your school?

V: Well, in our school it is quite obvious that pupils (kids) are the only and the main reason we are here. I often repeat to my team that we can imagine education without a principal, without a school building, even without teachers, but we cannot imagine an educational process without pupils, without children. That is why for me and for us it is something obvious that we have to motivate children to learn, to help them to get closer to knowledge and education in general.

F: What were the skills, knowledge and attitudes acquired as a result of the school principals' program?

V: Until being involved into participation in these trainings, I must confess, I did not know some things. I was aware of technical things, instructions, official legal documents, etc., which all principals are regularly provided with by governing authorities. Nevertheless, in the field of leadership and management my knowledge was not sufficient before these courses in my opinion.

I would say that I was not taught something new at these courses, but rather I was shown some directions for my own self-improvement. We were given lists of literature to read regarding given problems in our field. Also we were given a new terminology, especially in the field of law and legal issues. Another positive result of these courses was that they stimulated a habit in me to search for more information online regarding certain issues within educational process, to think more strategically about these issues, and to uncover some aspects which previously did not pay attention to.

F: How did the school principals' program help you support teachers to use student-centered learning approaches? Please provide examples.

V: Actually during these courses the issues of student-centered learning were not touched so vastly. If I recall it correctly, we were covering the following fields: management, leadership, curriculum, law, financial issues and statistics. So I would say that trainings were predominantly leadership and management oriented.

F: How did you rate (1-5) the effectiveness of the principals' training programs? Please explain your rate.

V: I would give "4". And the reason is that not all the trainers were enthusiastic and gave really something worth listening. Some of them were quite 'mechanical' in their approach to trainings. It

looked like some trainers were not interested in what they were doing, simply trying to speak within a given time limits without even thinking about whether the things they were speaking about were interesting and worth listening for trainees or not. I remember some trainers were brilliant but at the same time there were trainers who were absolutely uninteresting and not enthusiastic. To tell the truth such trainers did not give me anything new.

F: What would you recommend to improve the future school principals training programs, especially in the area of supporting teachers in student-centered learning?

V: Let me describe you how the trainings took place. I remember that I was coming to school at 7 a.m. to do my work at school, then at 14:00-14:30 I had to leave the school for trainings in Baku city. Sessions started at 15:30-16:00 and continued until 20:00. And this was happening three times a week.

I think the most important thing for many of us, including me, during these trainings was that they were organized during the working days and working time. It was really very difficult in certain situations to combine the courses with our regular day-by-day work. I remember that some days I was returning back to school at around 22:00 trying to do the work left at school. It was really uncomfortable. I think it would be more effective if such courses could be organized for example during summer time, when lessons are over at schools and principals and teachers are relatively free in terms of their time and workload. I know that sometimes such courses are carried out in the rural areas and the learning process is combined with some kind of recreation. I think it would also add a bit of a positive impact to the whole process.

With such an approach trainees could have more time to discuss with each other as well as with trainers the information made available to them during the trainings after a given session without being in a rush and hurrying up to get back to their own work. Moreover, I guess instead of giving a big amount of information during one or two weeks long trainings, it would be more appropriate and effective in terms of perception of new information to have such courses during one month for example with one session being less in terms of time limits. As I said in our cases sessions started at 15:30-16:00 and continued until 20:00. But those were working days and all trainees had to balance somehow their regular day-by-day workload and responsibilities with attempts to get something new and useful from the trainings.

That is why I would advise to carry out such courses during summertime or holidays, when the workload of principals and teachers is relatively less and we can focus more on the trainings and obtaining of new knowledge, and to organize such events in conjunction with some recreational activities.

F: What personal gains (including increased responsibilities, self-confidence etc.) have you achieved as a result of the principals' training program?

V: For me the main outcome was increased self-confidence. I would not say that I had known something new in terms of my professional experience but I could improve some of my leadership and management skills. I have 15 years long experience of work at schools as a principal and deputy principal. For that reason, these courses did not provide me with something unique or really unknown in this regard. But the trainings added to my self confidence as a leader and manager. I remember when I first participated at these courses I had found out that in some cases I knew even more than some of the trainers.

You know, before there were widely spread stereotypes like 'if you have enough money and if you are a protégée of someone from supervising authorities then you can make a career and you do not need any courses' or something like that, but such programs made many of us re-think our attitude to the whole process and we had started a bit to change this old paradigm.

Such trainings made us understand that many things we can do and achieve ourselves without money, contacts in high circles, etc. Another result of these trainings was that I have started to think about possibility in the future to leave my school principal position and to work in the field of education, on higher positions, to participate in management and governing in the field of education, to grow professionally more and more. That is why I think that the main consequences of these courses for me personally as increased self-confidence, improvement. of my existing skills and willingness to grow more, to set new goals and to achieve them by means of self-improvement and expanding of my knowledge and experience.

At the end of the interview Mr. VM was asked to fill out the table indicating time dedicated to leadership duties during a week: What is the school principal doing during the week?

Completed by Mr. V after the interview

Leadership Tasks	Between 1-5%	Between 6-10%	Between 11-20%	Between 21-30%	Between 31%- 50%	Between 51%- 100%
Making classroom resources available	X					
Making teacher guides available				X		
Making learning aids available		X				
Classroom observations			X			
Follow-up to classroom observations	X					
Mentoring teachers	X					
Planning teacher training / professional development	X					
Collecting and analyzing school data		X				
Meeting with parents				X		
Meeting with community members	X					
Meeting with Governing Authority	X					
Writing reports to submit to Governing Authority	X					
Analysis of teaching's quality dynamics		X				
Measures to increase quality of teaching (seminars, meetings, monitorings)			X			