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There are lots of surprises in educational leadership. You have to expect the unexpected. Maybe you find yourself working with a particular student population that you never imagined you would enjoy. Maybe you're hopeful about being able to strike a balance between life as an administrator and life at home. Maybe you are an assistant administrator and, for your first eight days on the job, your principal was absent and unable to communicate with you. If you are like me, it is all of the above (and more).

You meet *a lot* of people in your first few weeks as an administrator. It will become evident pretty quickly which relationships will be easy to foster and which may require a bit more TLC. I had a high school counter part who was a sounding board when I first started. I appreciated her willingness to share and to answer the questions I wasn't comfortable asking anyone else. I share my office with an amazing clinical team member who is a wealth of knowledge and knows the history of the program and our students pretty much by heart. I am also lucky enough to have a husband who works in higher education so we can discuss things on a grander scale than someone outside the field. That said, within the first few weeks on the job, it felt like something was missing. Administration can be a lonely gig without having a truly critical friend. At times I felt stressed and really needed someone to talk shop with me about my own building. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to find that in my principal.

My principal and I have a unique working relationship – one of trust, understanding, and admiration for each other's strengths and experience. And this relationship strengthened quickly, in part, I believe because our student population is so challenging. We work in a building where all of the students have behavioral and/or emotional challenges. We make a lot of decisions for the safety of our students and staff on a daily basis. There is no time for second-guessing. We, along with a very strong clinical team and group of teachers, confer as often as we can and then debrief after incidents. Sometimes this debriefing takes place immediately following an event. Other times it takes place after the building is empty and we are sharing our "what ifs" and "did we do the right things" with each other. We don't waste time gossiping and we support each other in just the right ways.

It is not always easy to find someone you trust and can bounce ideas off of, especially if you are the sole administrator in a building. That said, you need an outlet. Don't let yourself get consumed with the stress of working alone keep you from finding someone to vent to. And don't let your big ideas disappear just because you aren't sure how they'll be received and you don't have someone to share them with. Don't confuse a gossip partner with a critical friend. You need someone who walks the line of challenging and supporting you at the same time.

I learned another very valuable lesson during my first year as an administrator that I incorporate into my daily practice: small things matter. Staff morale has a huge impact on how your building operates so don't underestimate the value of caring gestures and

acts of kindness. My first week in my current position was stressful to say the least. I realized my best plan of action was to stay calm and support the faculty and staff as best I could. So I brought in bagels on day three. And I cleaned up the faculty room after school. And I asked people what they needed, offering breaks to teachers so they could step away for a few minutes. These were small things but they mattered. I spent time trying to make this work environment as positive as possible.

I now try to initiate some type of staff morale booster or recognition once a month to get people thinking about their colleagues. It can be as simple as putting out a basket of paper and markers and asking people to write thank you notes to put in each other's mailboxes. Or it can be an all-out spread that we provided to faculty and staff for teacher appreciation week, putting out a different treat each day for a week because teachers should be celebrated at least five days a year, not just one.

I have always been a planner so I like doing little things but I appreciate the fact that these types of "feel-good" activities are not for everyone. If your building currently has someone who is already working on ideas for staff recognition, see if you can be a part of it. There's no need to go over the top but showing your support for those initiatives and adding more ideas to the table can go a long way. People feel valued when you show them that they're doing a great job. Or even just tell them. Too often faculty and staff interact with administrators when things are going wrong. But if you make an effort to point out the good things on a regular basis, teachers will start to relax when you walk into their classroom as opposed to tense up.

Another challenge I was faced with this year is balancing the need to understand the past while finding ways to push for change. It is easy to come in from the outside and make suggestions for changes to programs or procedures that seem faulty from the start. But it is important to understand the context around the current state and if other ways have been tried in the past. We all like the idea of fixing things but sometimes our "fixing" does more harm than good. Many times faculty and staff members have been involved in creating those program or processes, sometimes through lengthy deliberations and months or even years of work. You don't want to alienate people who worked hard on something even if it is doesn't work the way you expect it to.

There are some people who can manage these types of conversations better than others. I am still learning how to speak up and make suggestions without being too forceful. Throughout my first year, I observed how people carried themselves and spoke to each other in meetings. It was helpful to figure out what roles people play in group settings. I realized my strength is to ask probing questions that are not confrontational but that often lead to further discussion, benefiting the whole group. I also learned the importance of following up and following through. It is extremely helpful to not just point out areas in need of improvement, but also ways to make those improvements. If you want to point out problems, you better be ready to help solve them.

When I think back to my first few weeks as an administrator, I realize that I was more ready than I thought I was. We all have a bag of tricks that we haven't fully accessed yet

but those tricks seem to come out when we need them the most. Finding a critical friend was easy for me, along with planning small things for our staff. Speaking up is still a goal but I don't think that's a bad thing. We all have our strengths and weaknesses. Spending time reflecting and learning from each other will help us pick up even more tricks to add to our bags along the way.