

School Administrators Association of New York State

Vanguard

WINTER 2020

Exploring
Educational
Leadership



REFLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

THREE REASONS WHY LEADERS
NEED BRAIN BREAKS

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:
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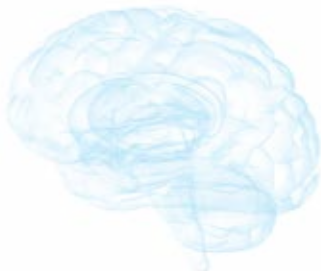
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THREE REASONS

Why Leaders Need Brain Breaks

By Peter DeWitt, EdD



Winter is upon us, and the holidays are now in our rearview mirror. Unfortunately, the lofty goals we set last summer may also seem far, far away, and the people who promised to be on board are in a midyear slump, and feeling a bit tired. There is no better time than now to get that work-life balance in order. We know that work-life balance is often a subject for those in school leadership, but it seems that more people talk about it than ever put it into practice.

A couple of years ago I was experiencing increased stress and anxiety, and work-life balance was something I thought about but did little to shift the balance from work to

In fact, most times I felt a little strange for trying it at all. However, this time I was sitting in a hotel room in Texas and realized I needed to make some life changes, because my body was breaking down.



life. My travel schedule had me on the road about 47 weeks a year, and this particular week in June of 2018 was a stressful one. Four states in four days, which meant working by day and flying by night. As much as I love what I do, the stress of it all was getting to me, and I was out of balance when it came to my personal and professional life.

That was the time that I knew I needed a brain break of some sort. The interesting thing is that it took utter exhaustion to teach me that I needed to find a better way to live life. What was equally interesting is that brain breaks were not new for me. As a principal, in a school of caring adults, we used brain breaks to help our students with their anxiety-related behavior. It's strange to see the importance of brain breaks with students, but not see them as important for us as adults. So, I began making a change to increase the number of brain breaks I used in my life.

MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION

During that stressful week in the month of June, I began a path to consistently practice meditation and mindfulness. I use the word "consistently," because I had spent years trying it from time to time in the comfort of my hotel rooms but I always worried I was doing it wrong.

Mindfulness is when we practice being focused on one issue at a time in our daily lives. It usually means that we are focusing on something positive where we show gratitude for our lives or we just focus on being present in the moment with whom-ever we may be talking with, which is not easy to do with 24/7 media coming at us, smartphones with sounds that go off every time we receive a message, and our laptops

that seem to call us because we have paperwork that must be finished. Eisler (2018) writes, "Mindfulness is all about being aware, which of course includes the practice of meditation. When you are being actively mindful, you are noticing and paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and movements, and also to the effects you have on those around you."

Meditation is a bit deeper. Meditation is when we take a few minutes or even an hour to focus inward and practice breathing. Yes, that thing we do unconsciously throughout our days is something we should also practice to do at a deeper level. Eisler states that meditation is an intentional practice, where you focus inward to increase calmness, concentration, and emotional balance. It means we proactively, and consciously, take a deep breath in and follow it as it leaves us. It reminds me of times when I was a teacher and would recite, "In with the good air, and out with the bad air," with my students. In 2018 Pew Research showed that 40 percent of adults meditated regularly as opposed to 14 percent just the year before.

Our ten minutes of meditation and mindfulness teaches us how to transfer those moments of relaxation into our daily lives. Think of it as the ultimate way to go from surface to

deep, and then onto transfer-level learning. Surface level is when we begin taking our brain breaks, deep is when we are able to focus on one area for ten minutes or so at a time, and transfer is when we find ourselves more focused in our jobs and in our personal lives. For example, it means that we can go from being a part of a conversation to an active listener where we are not distracted and can ask deeper questions of the person in the conversation with us.

School leaders do not have to practice mindfulness and meditation, but research shows that the job of a school administrator is more stressful than ever, so finding some method for taking a brain break every day is vital to their success. Not only are leaders experiencing an increased amount of job stress; they are also highly at risk of job burnout. Not paying attention to the stress that happens around them can lead to medical issues, marital issues, and unhealthy habits. Mindfulness may not sound like a bad alternative, eh?

TIME OUT FOR LEADERS

The reality is that school leaders do not have to have a hefty travel schedule to experience stress and anxiety. As a former school principal I remember the sleepless nights, or at best, the nights where I woke up at 2:00 a.m. worrying about issues that many times worked out to not be a big deal at all. What's worse is that leaders are often seen as stoic figures who should never let stress or anxiety get to them, so therefore they hide it all so no one knows the stress that they are under.

There are numerous benefits for taking brain breaks, timeouts, or sitting in a quiet space for ten minutes to practice meditation. It increases attention spans, calms us down, and helps create more focus. In fact, there are at least three reasons why we should all think about how to step away from the job for a few moments, find a place to take a brain break, and learn how to breathe all over again. Those reasons are job overload, increasing the ability to have a deeper focus in relationships, and developing healthy habits.

JOB OVERLOAD

In a ten-year study for the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), Fuller et al. found that job duties for principals have had a significant increase. This is a very delicate balance for many reasons, and I have constantly been witness to how job overload can impact self-efficacy.

Bandura (1977) found that self-efficacy is the confidence we have in our own actions. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis furthered Bandura’s work when they found that self-efficacy is context specific. Many people do not realize, however, that Bandura (2000) also found that leadership self-efficacy is present in our practices, and that all leaders double their efforts in areas they feel confident in and slacken their efforts in areas where they lack confidence.

What this means is that leaders are consistently asked to focus on tasks or mandates where they may not feel a sense of efficacy, and that can lead to job burnout, insecurities, or job failure.

In my own professional experi-

ence, I have seen the impact all of this can have on school administrators. One week per month I coach leaders in two different districts in central California. I see 17 teams of leaders over a five-day period. To provide some perspective, in one high school district where I coach teams in four high schools and four middle schools, they have the highest gang population per capita than any other city in California. In the other school district where I coach all principals K-12 plus their district directors, they have a high gang population, are next to a maximum security prison, and have close to a 90 percent poverty rate with high staff and leadership turnover. They all work very hard but are stressed to the maximum because of the duties that come with such demanding jobs.

When I was a new principal I was excited to get the job, but one thing I missed in the contract was the fine line that said, “Duties as assigned.” School leaders worldwide have signed contracts with the same wording, but never realize how much job creep will creep into their lives and take over. The

principals that I have been coaching for over two years have seen many duties assigned that they didn’t realize existed, and part of my job has been to work with the district to lower the activities and maximize the positive impact of leaders.

MORE FOCUS

Research shows that we are bad at multitasking, which is upsetting because we have more ways to multitask than ever before. Our phones are our best friends some days because they allow us to call loved ones and make a connection, but they are bad on other days because they are a tool that everyone can use to find us. What’s worse is that when we use our phones to get on social media for a much-needed brain break, it can actually be the exact tool that causes more anxiety because we see colleagues in other schools posting on social media, and we begin to feel that we are not good enough because we are not posting those cool things.

What we need to do is put our devices down, walk away from them,

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and find some quiet in our lives so we can recharge. Research shows that the average adult picks up their phone within ten minutes of waking up every morning. For those of us old enough to remember rotary phones, or even the cordless ones, we did not instantly go pick those up in the first ten minutes of our day.

When we can set down our devices, and take ten minutes for some quiet, we begin to focus on enjoying the quiet and living in that moment. After consistently taking ten and living in the moment, we realize that we need to live in the moment while we visit classrooms, attend meetings, and have one-on-one conversations with people in our personal and professional lives.

HEALTHY HABITS

About a year ago, when I wrote a blog for *Education Week* about mindfulness, a friend of mine who lives in England commented online that he was worried readers would think they just needed to do ten minutes and life would be great. Clearly, that is not at all what I meant when I posted the blog, but could see why he was concerned. The ten minutes is always

about focusing on being present in the moment. Mindfulness, meditation, and brain breaks are about training ourselves to always go back to the moment we are in.

What I find is that when I can make short-term goals, it usually leads to long-term gains. The ten minutes I practiced led into making better choices for most meals, which led to better choices when working out, which led to more focused workshop presentations, and greater quality one-on-one conversations at work and at home. Ultimately the ten minutes led to a more healthy lifestyle. When leaders find that one thing they can do for ten minutes – mindfulness, meditation, brain breaks, working out, going for a walk without their phone, or going outside to breathe in fresh air – it can lead to better decisions during those stressful and nonstressful moments in life.

IN THE END

Leaders are more stressed in their

After consistently taking ten and living in the moment, we realize that we need to live in the moment while we visit classrooms, attend meetings, and have one-on-one conversations with people in our personal and professional lives.

jobs than ever. This time of year is often one that is daunting because it gets too cold to go outside, or we experience fewer hours of sunlight each day, but it also creates a great opportunity to become more healthy. We need to actively seek more calm in our lives, and give ourselves permission to step away from our work. It doesn't mean we love our work less. Quite the opposite, actually, because it means we want to be less tired, more inspired, and more authentically connected to home and work.

I get that some people reading about all of this may think that they have to put on a pair of sweatpants, light a candle, and turn off the lights in their office so no one can hear them repeating "Ohm" over and over again, but that is not at all what this practice needs to look like.

It doesn't matter whether leaders replace mindfulness and meditation practices with something that may work better for them such as going to the gym, putting their phones down for an hour, or having an uninterrupted date night with their partner or spouse – it's finally committing to find that work-life balance we often talk about so much.

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Peter DeWitt, EdD, is the author of several books including *Collaborative Leadership: 6 Influences That Matter Most* (Corwin Press, 2016), *Coach It Further: Using the Art of Coaching to Improve School Leadership* (Corwin Press, 2018), and *Instructional Leadership: Creating Practice out of Theory* (Corwin Press, 2020). His work has been adopted at the state level and in universities in North America as well as internationally. He writes the Finding Common Ground blog for *Education Week*, and has been a proud SAANYS member since 2006.



SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:

Past, Present, and Future

By Pat Fontana

“All eyes look to you.”

Kevin Strahley, the 2018 New York State Middle School Principal of the Year, sums up the difference between his original perception and his realistic view of school leadership in these terms. Strahley, principal at Windsor Central Middle School in the Windsor Central School District, adds that it was “a little bit of a shock to know I had an immediate impact.”

Are future school leaders prepared for that responsibility? What can they learn about the reality of administration from quality leaders of the past and the present?

LOOKING BACK

School leadership continues to be a vital part of the fabric that makes up many of those who have “retired” from administration. Jay Matuk, who retired after 17 years as a principal, most recently at Cold Spring Harbor Junior-Senior High School, continues to teach and to lead. Matuk is an associate professor in the educational leadership program at C.W. Post University and a SAANYS mentor coach in Long Beach and Brentwood schools.

When asked why he wanted to become a principal, Matuk says he likes to think of himself as a problem solver and, as a teacher, he saw a number of issues that “needed someone who would be able to work with people, address the issue, and try to solve it.” He wanted to be involved at the level where he could make some institutional changes.

Likewise, Tamara Ivan retired in June 2018, after 16 years as a principal and a total of 34 years in the education field. Today, she is back at it, working as a substitute principal, helping a nonprofit by training teachers and working with special-needs children, and consulting for a school district. In Ivan’s case, education is truly in her blood. Her father was a principal and a superintendent. Her twin sister is also in education and she has another sister who is a teacher. In her family, she says, they “talked about it, lived it.”

Ivan says she always seemed to take on leadership activities, beginning with her teaching career in a progressive district. She saw that the district had a need for young people to take on more leadership roles and realized she could do some of the administrative work. She pursued a degree that enabled her to move into an administrative role but didn’t really know where she wanted to go with it. A job as an assistant principal became a “good stepping stone.”

However, the assistant principal role involved a lot of discipline and not as much curriculum work. Ivan wanted to work more with teachers, in curriculum development and implementing new programs. So, she decided it was “time to make a move and take on more of a leadership

role.” She moved into the role of the fourth- to sixth-grade principal, where she stayed for 14 years. During that time, Ivan witnessed a lot of changes, including state education initiatives taking on a bigger role. After “retiring” as a principal, she moved into the position of director of curriculum, which enabled her to look at the “entire picture,” supporting the whole student, “not just in one building but as a whole district.”

THE POSITIVE, THE NEGATIVE,
AND THAT **GREATEST**
SINGLE MOMENT

With decades of experience in the education field, as teachers and as administrators, Matuk and Ivan have experienced many memorable moments. Some of their more positive experiences have involved feedback from students. Matuk says that “when kids would come back and thank you, for helping them, for being there,” that is a “tremendous form of feedback.” He has kept every letter and card that kids gave him when he was principal. Even in retirement, he says students still email him to thank him.

Ivan points out that each moment was “kind of special.” Some were small and some were large. Her greatest single moment as a school administrator came when she and a social worker “really saved a child’s life.” A boy who barely spoke and had almost nothing in terms of clean clothes or school supplies went on to become valedictorian of his high school and then graduated from college. As principal, Ivan worked with the social worker to reach out to the boy’s father, who was living in another state and who had no idea what the child’s life was really like. The situation involved a lot of effort, including working with the police and the parent situation, but Ivan says, “Any time you can save that child, that’s a victory.”

Victories are not without challenges. Ivan adds that “it’s hard when you’re trying to implement quality programs and you don’t really have parental support.” State educational requirements and regulations add to those challenges. She says that “so many of the other requirements take so much time, it’s

sometimes hard to fill everybody’s needs in a timely basis.”

Matuk points to the “limited avenues that schools can pursue” when it comes to serious issues such as substance abuse among students. He says that as he grows older, he realizes that “schools need to take an approach that deals with the underlying illness,” and that as a principal, he “would agonize over suspensions with kids who were struggling with addiction.” He says that one of the main reasons he went into the job of principal was “to help kids and to make the school environment better for everyone” but “problems like this are almost insurmountable.”

Doreen McSain, principal at Glenwood Elementary School in the Vestal Central School District and the 2019 New York State Elementary Principal of the Year, has been in her current position since 2009. McSain says her greatest single moment as a school administrator also involved a young boy.

“A first grader gave me the biggest run for my money I’ve ever had,” she explains. He “pushed my buttons.” Even though she says she loved the special-needs student “with my whole heart, there were times I didn’t know what to do with him.” When he was in fifth grade, her team talked to him about transitioning to regular middle school and it was a “huge job to help him to know that he had a group of people who weren’t going to give up on him.” At graduation, “this boy and his mother came up to me and the boy gave me a huge hug and said, ‘I will never forget you.’” The next year, the boy sent McSain his middle school grades “and they were all in the 80s. That’s why I’m doing this job.”

LOOKING INWARD

Before taking on her position in school leadership, McSain taught in the classroom at the elementary school level. She was “bumped to different grade levels each year” in a fairly large school district and ended up at the middle school teaching sixth grade in a team format. Though she didn’t realize it at the time, she now says that “in hindsight, the opportunity to teach



all those grade levels and work as a reading interventionist at the middle school shaped a lot of what I do and what I try to do in my current role.”

McSain’s current role is the result of a long career of taking on new roles and completing the education necessary to move to the next stage. She earned a master’s degree in literacy, achieved national board certification in early adolescent language arts, and earned her administrative certification at SUNY Cortland. She says that the yearlong process of national board certification motivated her and changed her thinking. She “became the person on the team who was not necessarily

behind the scenes, who took on quite a few leadership roles.”

Her new leadership roles included professional development for other teachers and then taking on the responsibility of a district-level administrative position, as coordinator for Reading First, a federal initiative. While managing the Reading First requirements, the challenge of meshing the

specific requirements with what professional development needed to be changed her thinking. It was then that she realized she wanted to work as a building principal, that she “wanted the opportunity to work with students and to do what I did as coordinator.”

Kevin Strahley also earned his administrative certification at SUNY Cortland and is now in his eighth year as a middle school principal and his 29th year in New York State education. He says he has “been a student of leadership for a very long time” even though “lots of people saw the leadership in me before I did.” Strahley

sees his role as service leadership, “creating the opportunities for staff to do their job as best as they can and getting out of the way so they can do it.”

He is about “building relationships, knocking down obstacles, and making sure resources of time, materials, and support are in place so the practitioners can practice to the best of their ability.” Focused on “tight and loose leadership,” Strahley says there are “certain things that we are tight about – practices, goals, priorities,” but he also sees a need for a tremendous amount of latitude for teachers to step up and do things the way they see fit. He says his leadership style “allows professionals to be professionals. Leadership is born out of that loose sense of leadership; it builds confidence and competence.”

LOOKING FORWARD

Two College of St. Rose students working toward administration degrees agree that leadership is complicated and vital to the future of ed-

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ucation. Kelly Onorato reflects that “leadership in education is a humbling, interdependent venture.” She adds that “stepping into the unknown can feel like a personal and professional risk” but that an aspiring leader “must have the willingness as a leader to embrace vulnerable moments and push through fear-based inner dialog to give him/herself the experiences necessary to learn and grow.”

Student Jodi Coppolo shares that she has “wanted to go back to school to get my administration degree for a very long time, and I am attempting it right now!” She says that she has “the drive to do more, become the leader I know schools are in need of,” adding that those in education “need great leaders to help guide us and make the essential large-scale decisions that keep a school moving forward.”

Coppolo moves forward through her studies with “a very clear vision of where I see curriculum going, I envision educators using a more interactive, problem-based learning approach. A curriculum that engages all learners and places the students in an active role and teachers as facilitators.” Echoing some of the same observations made by the current and retired principals, Coppolo acknowledges that “as a leader, it is your responsibility to take control and make tough decisions.” As those in the past and present also acknowledge, “You need to be well prepared, you will make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. The key is to blame no one but yourself, own your failures and learn from them.”

Onorato emphasizes that there is a key difference between managing and leading, even in an educational setting. Having recently taken on a supervisory role herself, she says that she “aimed to support the people in my unit every single day, and I really felt their support in return.” However, even though her team accomplished a lot together in a relatively short amount of time, she also learned through the experience “what does not work for me in a leadership capacity.” She felt a constant conflict between “managing” and “leading,” with the sense that managing was the more valued skill set, and that put a great deal of pressure

on her to “manage others in a way that made me very uncomfortable.”

The most important quality of a leader is not simply managing, Onorato believes. She reflects that when “people are treated like professionals, they behave like professionals. When the best is expected of people, their best is what they will give you. The same holds true for students. If you believe students are capable of learning something, much more often than not, they will.”

Coppolo conveys what many future leaders may be experiencing as they learn more about the realistic world of school administration. She notes that the fact that she is trying to “synthesize what I am learning with who I am as a leader is a huge task, one that I want to do my best at.” She adds that she is “trying to grasp my understanding of my goals and purpose on this path. I know what end vision I have for myself, but it’s the road to get there I am navigating. This process so far has really made me have to look deep into myself to truly learn about me.”

WORDS OF WISDOM FOR THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Retired principals Matuk and Ivan as well as current principals Strahley and McSain agree that they would choose their career path again without hesitation. Each principal emphasized that even though “it isn’t for everyone,” school leadership can be “rewarding” and leave a person feeling “blessed.” They do advise that aspiring leaders ensure they are going into administration for the right reason.

McSain says her first piece of advice would be to “not ever forget where you came from.” What she does every day, she says, is “framed through the lens of a teacher and that helps me make those hard decisions.” When she thinks about what she wanted from her principal when she was a teacher, it helps her to understand “what the educators in this building need from me.”

What she does every day, she says, is “framed through the lens of a teacher and that helps me make those hard decisions.”

Matuk advised that “most of the time, you’re going to be involved in changing something or building something and few people will know the role you have in making it happen. You’ve got to be content with that.” Ivan emphasizes that it’s critical to “listen to others’ points of view. It’s not always comfortable but it’s a skill that can be developed.”

Strahley reflects on the changing role of school leadership that he has seen throughout his career. He says that now it “involves a greater emphasis on social emotional learning and mental health initiatives. Schools are looked at to provide more noninstructional aspects of student development.” He advises that aspiring leaders should “be mindful of that shift and be prepared to have an impact on all aspects of a child’s life.”

Their words of advice to the incoming commissioner of education are similar to their advice to aspiring leaders. Their key word is “listen.” “Be willing to listen to all constituents,” McSain says. Adds Ivan, “Really listen to the folks that are in the field that are working in the position day-to-day.” Matuk emphasizes that the “building principal has the biggest impact” so there should be more “opportunities for building leadership to give input.”

Strahley, with all eyes looking to him as a school leader, focuses back on the children. The future of school leadership, including aspiring administrators and the new commissioner of education, would be wise to “continue to be an advocate for children across our state in light of every limitation and obstacle that is facing them.”

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

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BY LISA MEADE
 Granville Junior/Senior
 High School Principal
 2015 NYS Middle School Principal of the
 Year for SAANYS/NASSP.



The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse

by Charlie Mackery

Some might skip over this column wondering why a children's book is being highlighted in this issue. In the spirit of reflection, I'd suggest that some of life's best lessons are in children's books. This book has quickly become my newest inspiration.

Barnes and Noble named this book as their 2019 book of the year, as chosen by their booksellers.

One bookseller remarked,

"In a time when our world can seem so divided and uncertain, here are a boy, a mole, a fox, and a horse to remind us that love and kindness are everything, and that **we all matter.**"
 — Scott Skar, Bookseller, Sioux Falls, SD

The main character in this book is the boy. I'd suggest the boy could be any one of us on our journey through leadership. The boy soon meets other animals and poses questions to each of them that help him realize life (leadership) lessons. When the book begins, the boy is alone. I found some connection to that as a principal. At the end of a workday, a principal is often left alone with his/her thoughts wondering how successful a day was. Sometimes, we are left on our own to make decisions we are not always certain of.

Through the simple questions and gorgeous illustrations, we are reminded that true success is the love and hope we give to others. And, leadership isn't about who the best administrator is. It's about being your own best self – flaws and all. That can be hard to remember when juggling all of the demands our positions bring and the mixed messages public and social media can cast.

Through the story, the boy shares his insecurities and realizes his animal friends accept him even more. As leaders, we develop relationships with teachers and other administrators that require us to be authentic. That can feel risky but without that unveiling, we miss an opportunity to help each other.

Leadership is hard work. On some of our toughest days, we all need reminders of what we are to each other and what truly matters. This book offers just that. It's the perfect gift to yourself or a trusted colleague.



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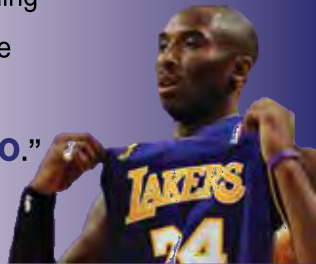


OPINIONS



"The **most important** thing is to **try and inspire** people so that they can be **great** in whatever they **want to do.**"

– Kobe Bryant



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| - Depends on authority | | - On goodwill |
| - Inspires fear | | - Generates enthusiasm |
| - Says, "I" | | - Says, "We" |
| - Places blame for the breakdown | | - Fixes the breakdowns |
| - Knows how it is done | | - Shows how it is done |
| - Uses people | | - Develops people |
| - Take credit | | - Gives credit |
| - Commands | | - Asks |
| - Says, "Go" | | - Says, "Let's go" |

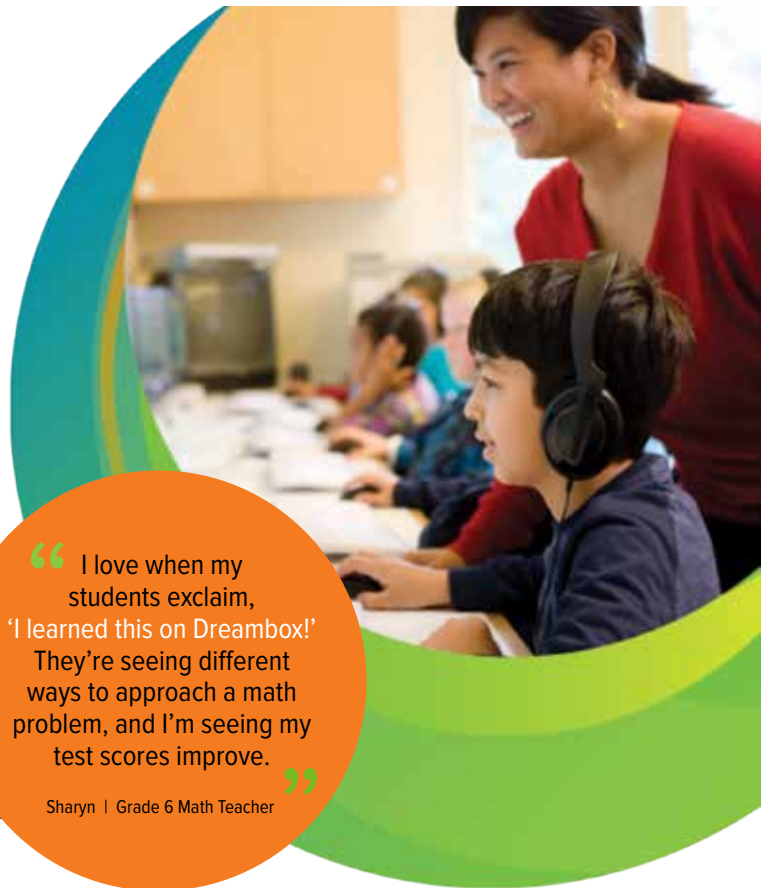
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The Forever Mindset:

Wear Today, Gone Tomorrow



By Paul M. Fanuele, EdD

As we enter the middle of the school year, it is appropriate to be reflective and make sure we are not letting stress and the winter gloom get the best of us. We need to keep a proper mindset and not be distracted from what is most important. We need to remind our students to do the same.

FOREVER MINDSET

I have long advocated for us to focus on a growth mindset. This concept, brought to the forefront by Carol Dweck (2006), stresses that “everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (p. 7). The opposite is a fixed mindset, which means that “your qualities are carved in stone,” so effort would not enhance your abilities (p. 6). Dweck’s work ties in nicely with what I will call the forever mindset. In order to understand this mindset, we must first reflect upon the meaning of the word “forever.”

Reflecting upon the meaning of the word “forever” is one way to stay focused and grounded during our busy lives. When thinking about this word, our students might immediately visualize the store Forever 21. Adults might refer to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, which defines the word “forever” as “for an endless time” or “for a limitless time.” It seems like an appropriate word to think about as we deal with the doldrums of winter and seemingly endless supply of frigid temperatures and darkness. However, the word “forever” can be misleading. Author Seth Godin (2019) believes there are three kinds of forever: forever of discomfort, forever of plenty, and forever of never. As you read about these types of forever, try to conjure up your own life experiences.

FOREVER OF DISCOMFORT

The first kind of forever is the forever of discomfort. This version of forever strikes at any point when we are in a temporary situation, but it feels like it will last, well, forever. Think about your own life experiences thus far. Did you ever think something would never end, only to realize it had already passed by? Examples could be completing an administration degree, a job interview process, a diet, physical training, or a long winter. All too often the forever of discomfort forces us to give up or lament over processes. People quit their diet, they do not go on a job interview, they stop their workout regime, they complain about the cold, and their stress level rises all because they forget that the discomfort will pass. We need to remind our-

selves, as well as our students, not to quit when things get tough, for what we think is forever at first is really not that long. The mantra “this too, shall pass” comes to mind. Our own life experiences should validate this point.

FOREVER OF PLENTY

This brings us to the second kind of forever, the forever of plenty. The forever of plenty is about the good times, when things are going well. You are on a hot streak and in a groove. The initiative you are leading is supported by all constituents, or a family vacation has allowed you to recharge your engines. For our students (perhaps us too), it is when they purchase some great new clothes that fit perfectly and at a great price, only to find out when at the checkout, they are even cheaper. We need to enjoy these times, but remember not to take them for granted. Unfortunately, for reasons out of our control, these times of plenty do pass.

I would like to keep with the clothing theme and share a story that is simply called “The Shirt.” It is a true story that might resonate with our students and is about someone I know well. This person was fortunate enough to purchase a shirt that fit perfectly and was nicely priced. It was wonderful and anytime he wore it, he was confident and felt great. However, as with any piece of clothing in the world of fashion, it cannot be worn too often; so it must be saved for special occasions worthy of its brilliance. An occasion such as a graduation, special birthday, family reunion, or big date. This person kept saving this shirt for the right moment in time. When that moment came and this person went to get dressed for this special event, the shirt no longer fit. I am this person (if you have not guessed it yet) and I thought the shirt would fit forever and that it would stay in fashion forever, which it definitely did not. We cannot waste opportunities because we never know when they will come around again. We need to wear the shirt; if we have a good idea, we need to act on it;

we should take informed risks, apply to our dream job, write an article. We cannot wait, especially when things are going well, because the forever of plenty can end tomorrow.



FOREVER OF NEVER

The final forever is the forever of never. This one is the reverse of the one just explained. As previously discussed, things can change in an instant. This is important to know, especially when caught in a negative situation. Godin (2019) believes that the dominant narrative of society is that we are stuck with where we are, be it status or skills. Which means we cannot change whatever situation we were born into. This belief is what Dweck (2006) would call a fixed mindset. Do not believe this, for once we do, our chances of changing our narrative are virtually gone. This is an important message for our students. We all might have difficult experiences that others do not have to face, and it might feel like we will face them forever. We need to remind ourselves that forever can end tomorrow. We need to push forward and change our situation. We need to believe in a growth mindset, not a fixed one.

FOREVER IS NOW

My goal in writing this article is to enable us to think about the word “forever” differently from this day forward and incorporate a forever mindset into our lives. The forever mindset reminds us that both discomfort and good times will not last and could end tomorrow. The forever mindset also comforts us with the knowledge that a negative life circumstance could also end tomorrow. Before closing this ar-

ticle, I think it is important to briefly discuss the Forever 21 clothing company mentioned earlier and where our students sometimes shop. No, it is not where I purchased my special shirt as I have never shopped there. However, as the company deals with bankruptcy and closes many of its stores, we can deliver the message to our students that 21 clearly does not last forever.

They, as well as us, need to take advantage of our youth (or what is left of it) and not wait to make a difference in the world. We need to make that difference now. Emily Dickinson said, "Forever is composed of nows." We cannot wait as we never know how long forever will be. We cannot wait to wear the shirt, we need to wear it now.

forever) and make a difference in the lives of our students. And if at all possible, let's do it in our favorite shirt. Wear today, gone tomorrow.

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CONCLUSION

As winter slowly transitions into spring, we need to be mindful of the forever mindset. We need to be comforted that the forever of winter will end, but be aware that the good times of spring will end too. We need to utilize the forever mindset to provide us with the urgency and focus needed to keep us anchored in our most important work. Let's get out there now (with our new understanding of the meaning of

PAUL M. FANUELE, EdD, is the executive principal at Arlington High School.




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Reflective Leadership: Continue to Bring Your Best



By James Cameron
and Bryan Miltenberg

What is leadership? What are the best leadership characteristics and/or styles? Whether you visit your local bookstore or just use a search engine, you can find a variety of books and articles on leadership and leadership styles. Whether preparing for an interview, creating a presentation, or just thinking about the next steps for success, searches on leadership characteristics will provide a plethora of terms and ideas.

Jimmy Casas discusses having the biggest impact educators can make for students in *Culturize*. Developing a culture that highlights human traits like empathy, kindness, and honesty is necessary for long-term success for our students and must be part of our daily work. Reflective practices and activities are the most powerful skills and tools to provide yourself and your team. Self-reflection and peer reflection are imperative to ensure you are making a big impact for your students. We have found that you can impact your schools through deliberate and intentional reflective practices.

The underlying condition necessary for self-reflective leadership is intellectual humility. We suggest humility not for moral virtue, but because meaningful reflection can't take place until the leader is willing to acknowledge that their ideas and actions may be flawed or incomplete. Further, as David Stroh wrote in *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, "Reflective leaders must explore or acknowledge the concept that they themselves may be contributing to the problem trying to be solved." One example is the leader who vents in frustration about inflexible staff members who are unwilling to embrace change, but fails to see that it is his own approach to the change process that may be causing the resistance.

In her groundbreaking work, *Insight: Why We're Not as Self-Aware as We Think*, researcher Tasha Eurich defines self-awareness as "the ability to see ourselves clearly, to understand who we are, how others see us, and how we fit into the world." Research shows that self-awareness is crucial for strong leadership, but as we move up the leadership ladder, we become less, not more, self-aware, due to the fact that leaders in positions of greater power are less likely to get authentic feedback about shortcomings and more likely to believe in their own prowess.

To combat this concept, leaders can cultivate self-awareness by exploring and identifying their own triggers, biases, and mental models. Emotional triggers are recurring events or concepts that cause a strong emotional reaction. Although we all have them, we rarely recognize them for what they are, and they cause us to act in sub-

optimal ways that lead to suboptimal outcomes without realizing they are at work. For example, when I (Bryan) worked as an assistant principal in charge of discipline, I was triggered by the suggestion that the consequence I meted out to a student was not significant enough. I became defensive, implying that the staff member didn't sufficiently care about the student. In retrospect, I was triggered by my own insecurities about the effectiveness of the school discipline program I was running, but failing to recognize that it affected the quality of the relationships and trust of my staff. It takes time to identify these triggers, but once identified we can recognize and stop them before we go down unproductive paths.

Almost all of us believe we are more rational and reasonable than others. In reality, we are all subject to any number of cognitive biases that distort our thinking and decision-making processes. One of the most common is the confirmation bias — the tendency to prioritize information that supports what we already believe. We're especially susceptible to this in certain situations such as classroom observations, where there may be thousands of potential "data points" but the observer picks which to record and focus on. If we come with a preconceived notion that a teacher is weak in questioning, we are more likely to focus on the weak questions.

A third key to cultivating self-awareness is recognizing the impact of our mental models. At times we become accustomed to something being a certain way, we often begin to unconsciously think this is the way it should or must be. When we see something done in a way that conflicts with our mental model (for example, a teacher who prioritizes shared texts and eschews self-selected independent reading in ELA, or vice versa), it is easier to negatively evaluate the practice than to challenge our own mental model. This also rears its head in hiring; when we create an idea of what, for example, a kindergarten teacher should be like, we may miss out on a candidate who is actually superior but doesn't fit our preconceived image.

There are a host of tools and

processes that self-reflective leaders can use to improve outcomes. Among our favorites is the concept of a "premortem." Prior to any undertaking, you consider the following: imagine that we are sitting here x amount of days/months from now, and this undertaking has failed — what went wrong? Generating "plausible reasons for the project's failure" is an excellent way to surface potentially faulty assumptions or weak strategies (Klein).

Another effective tool is called "deliberate perspective taking." When we find ourselves in disagreements with supervisors or colleagues, it's easy to discount others' ideas. In perspective taking, we write or discuss from the other party's perspective to better understand their motives, which are rarely as simple as we might make them out to be. In doing so, we see our own actions from their perspective, which can lead to either a change in the result we're looking for or a change in the approach to obtain it (Eurich).

Self-reflection, when done with honesty, integrity, and humility, will improve your practice personally and professionally. Peer reflection is an equally relevant practice to be done regularly. Peer reflection is best when engaging and reflecting with your professional learning network, and reflecting with colleagues within your professional learning community.

If you've ever had the opportunity to sit with Todd Whitaker, you've heard him discuss the power of Twitter and its ability to connect individuals. Twitter has provided educators a tool to connect and collaborate across classrooms, buildings, districts, and states with efficiency and simplicity. According to a 2016 study, the top professional uses of Twitter were resource sharing (96 percent), collaboration (84 percent), networking (77 percent), Twitter chats (74 percent), and even emotional support (22 percent) (Krutka and Carpenter). Prior to Twitter, collaborating and networking with colleagues across your region, state, or country would only happen at conferences. More and more people are turning to Twitter for a low-cost alternative to professional development (Caron).

Building your PLN to improve the

efforts and achievement within your PLC will be accelerated by online tools. Our PLNs push us to stay connected and perpetually reflect. Our PLN has led us to connecting and collaborating across districts. A simple gathering of people wanting to read the same book led to a Voxer book club. This book club has since evolved into the #Read2Lead Voxer book club, which has led to #Read2Lead Twitter chats.

Reflecting within your PLCs engages local stakeholders and faculty in the reflection process. Reflection brings teams together, teams gain insights about each other, and teams create better cohesiveness (Moore). Reflection practices help build greater direction for teams, create a greater sense of belonging, and improve the work of both the team and the individuals on that team (Nobel). We have found face-to-face reflection and survey/form reflection to be constructive. We have

utilized surveys and questionnaires to assess and respond to a variety of things affecting our schools. Soliciting feedback is just as important as responding to the feedback received. Responses to reflections must be thought out and should never be reactionary. The best types of responses are those developed in collaboration. Teams that are representative of your organization, built on trust, have participants that are willing to put differences aside, and are not afraid to disagree with each other are most successful. As Helen Keller said, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

Teams that are built on trust, accept responsibility, invest in each other, and are willing to challenge the status quo are the teams that will stay together and achieve great things. Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves define business capital and profes-

sional capital. They argue that teams must be comprised of strong individuals who do not fall into group thinking. Professional capital is made of human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. Teams that represent the various stakeholders within your community will help you provide human and social capital, but the leaders who are willing to turn over decisional capital to their teams will have the most effective teams.

When building or redeveloping your teams, it is important to have a reflective understanding of yourself. Self-reflection will help you understand the limits that your own conscious and unconscious bias, professional expertise, and background create. If a team comprises a group of individuals who look, sound, and act like you, the team is more likely to keep status quo and will hinder credibility and decisions the team makes. Teams that are made up of varying stakeholders from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds are teams that will be the most reflective and will keep all members accountable to the shared vision of your organization.

Reflection is a necessary component of any great classroom. The collective efficacy that focuses on meaningful reflection will lead to far better results. Baruti Kafele speaks about the importance of leadership and often proposes the question, Is my classroom, school, district a better place because I lead it? This implies that the most effective tool for growth and achievement is a mirror for self and peer reflection. Use your team and mirror to help keep you on track and to realign your priorities when your reflections tell you it is necessary.

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Stories:

Gentle Mirrors for Meaningful Reflection



“We do not learn from experience...
we learn from reflecting on experience.”

– John Dewey

By Jim Dillon

Probably nothing is more essential for learning and growth than meaningful reflection on one’s experiences and practices. Yet doing so on a regular basis, however, is extremely difficult in the school environment. Reflecting on my 40 years as an educator, I am convinced that one of the principal reasons why schools have remained the same over the years is precisely because so little, if any, time, has been devoted to incorporating meaningful reflection as a regular part of professional development.

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This problem is not because school leaders don't value reflection; rather, it is because they have inherited a school structure that requires a high degree of efficiency and order. Indeed, schools do a remarkable job in managing the movement of hundreds of students within very set time frames. Slowing down, stopping, and thinking about one's experience, however, are not compatible activities for the traditional design and culture of most schools.

Our technological culture has only increased to our collective impatience with any type of slowing down or delay. We fast-forward through commercials. We order ahead to avoid waiting in line. We listen to podcasts or audiobooks on speeds faster than normal speech. We are always looking ahead, thinking about what is around the corner, and the next new thing awaiting us.

Finding time for reflection, however, is not a new challenge for schools. In 1972, my first reading assignment for an educational foundations course was the book *Crisis in the Classroom* by Charles Silberman. He was a sociologist/journalist who was commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation to observe schools across the country. With a fresh set of eyes, he witnessed the routines and practices endemic to all schools. His most salient observation was the consistent pattern of what he referred to as mindlessness, which he described as the failure of educators "to ask why they are doing what they are doing – to think seriously or deeply about the purposes or consequences of education."

Based on his findings, it was clear to him that school improvement depended on "infusing institutions with purpose, more important, thought about purpose and about the ways techniques, content, and organization fulfill or alter purpose." To follow Silberman's recommendation, educators need the time to think and talk with colleagues. This, however, is much easier said than done: for most educators, stopping and reflecting seem like a luxury they can ill afford, especially when there are so many items on their to-do lists – and less and less time to do them.

And that is why school leaders cannot simply snap their fingers and

direct their staff to make time to reflect about what they are doing. Nor can they easily carve out reflection time into the school schedule, telling staff, "Here are your ten minutes to slow down and reflect on what you are doing, but then you must move to what's next on the schedule."

In addition to the structural problems of finding time and space for reflection, there are other emotional and psychological barriers for school leaders to consider as they try to promote reflection and discussion among educators:

- Reflection does not automatically produce insight; it might only confirm one's values, beliefs, and practices.
- Reflection could present the opportunity for educators to think about what's wrong with others or the school itself.
- Reflection should help educators make necessary corrections or adjustments in their practice; however, some might be not secure enough to acknowledge their areas of need.
- Reflection can reveal differences among staff that have been dormant or hidden in the routines of school. Many staff members could be disturbed to discover that there are colleagues with different values, beliefs, and assumptions about education.
- Reflection to be meaningful requires time, practice, and patience. Many staff members might view it as a waste of precious time that could otherwise be devoted to getting things done.
- Reflection does not automatically change the default mindset of many educators about problems: they should be solved/fixed as soon as possible, rather than being opportunities for learning.

- Reflection is no guarantee that educators will feel empowered to address the issues that are revealed from their reflection.

School leaders who value reflection will find no easy path for promoting it in their schools. To have any degree of success, they must be strategic and modest in the first steps they take to incorporate reflection into the routines and practices of the school. To start moving in that direction, they might be wise to employ an approach distilled from the wisdom of the ages: the use of stories.

Stories can smuggle important ideas and issues past those emotional and psychological barriers. Stories carefully open the door to meaningful reflection in an enjoyable way.

Here is one example of how stories can work. When our children were growing up and had a problem, my wife and I refrained from immediately lecturing them about what they did wrong. So we created what we called Billy or Suzie stories (our children had different names). We told them these stories several days after their problem occurred. In these stories, Billy or Suzie seemed to have a problem very similar to the one our children had – quite a coincidence. When the story ended, we would solicit their responses to how the character handled the problem and their advice for what the character could do differently in the future. Stories helped them to reflect upon and explore their problem with less anxiety than if they were directly confronted with their own mistakes and/or shortcomings. These stories planted the seeds of change that we as parents would cultivate later on with them.

Stories help us to see ourselves and more importantly see into ourselves; they create a safe way for us to encounter common problems and issues.

Rather than trigger intellectual debates, stories touch the heart and the mind. All responses to stories are valid and worthwhile; there are no right or wrong responses to them. Stories can expand our perception of a problem when we compare a character's response



to our response to a similar problem or situation. Stories offer a slow-motion replay of a problem or issue, allowing us to examine it more closely. Stories put the spotlight on the ideas, issues, or problems embedded in the narrative and not on us.

For all these reasons, stories are gentle mirrors for meaningful reflection.

Here are some suggestions for how school leaders could use stories to promote reflection with their staff:

- Share the current research on how we are wired to perceive and learn from stories. Stories “stick” in our mind long after bullet points on slides have faded from our memory.
- Create a modest time and space for reflection/discussion based on stories as a part of regularly scheduled meetings – this could be as little as 10-15 minutes.

- Find brief video clips, stories, and anecdotes pertaining to school issues. Make sure they have relatable characters and a simple narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end. (For full disclosure: I believe so much in the value of using stories for professional development, that I have written a book of such stories for educators.)
- Present the story as a communal experience like a read-aloud done in classrooms; follow it with a brief, small group discussion where staff can share responses without being challenged. Let it be an enjoyable time.
- Clarify that there are no strings attached to this experience; it is not linked to a new initiative or program that staff need to consider.

- Frame the hearing and responding to stories as recognition of the value of meaningful professional conversations. Emphasize how this experience can deepen and strengthen relationships. And point out that when relationships improve, everything improves.

Providing staff with stories for reflection is not a substitute for other professional development; however, it can be an additional tool for helping educators see their own needs and possibilities and those of the whole school community.

School leaders can trust that when educators reflect, think, and talk together in meaningful ways, good things will always follow.

JIM DILLON is a retired administrator and author.

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Purposeful Gratitude



By Jackie Levine

The first thank-you note I wrote to a student was riddled with anxiety and perfectionism. I remember drafting it first in Microsoft Word, obsessing over phrasing and reviewing my comma placements. With deliberate motions, I tamed my wild penmanship to make sure it was legible and modeled the very expectations I had for my students. Thank goodness I had purchased a package of ten note cards from my local CVS, because I quickly discarded the first card the moment I made a mistake. As the small muscles of my hand grew weary and began to burn, I would have to pause and shake my fingers out before starting to write again.

As email and texting had taken over most of my written communications, I was certainly out of practice with my handwriting.

But I persevered; I needed to thank Chris for his kindness to another student.

It was a Tuesday, and we were in the throes of reading workshop. Chris, the soon-to-be recipient of this note, was a quiet student who committed to his independent reading and avoided the temptation to get into the side conversations that occasionally occurred with this particular cohort of fourth graders. My attentions were often split between the students with whom I needed to confer with and a merry band of students who could not resist distracting one another. It would have been easy for a student like Chris to go unnoticed.

Fortunately, he was on my radar, as all my students were, but especially at this particular moment. What Chris did that day was not obvious, and it was not done with the intention of catching my attention. He stood, retrieved tissues, and brought them back to a sniffling classmate. The child had not asked for the tissues, and Chris did not comment or ask if he needed the tissues. He was simply thoughtful, and his neighbor was grateful. With only a small smile of acknowledgment to his friend, he resumed reading his new book.

I wanted Chris to know I noticed this, and that it was a mere snapshot of his character that I had grown to treasure. I wanted him to know how proud I was of him just for being a good friend in a simple moment in time, as he so often was in class. I had often written thank-you cards to students for gifts they would give, but it occurred to me that day that I needed to thank my students for being their awesome, beautiful selves.

Starting that Tuesday in fourth grade several years ago, I adopted the practice of expressing gratitude in the form of handwritten notes. I started with my students, realizing they were doing things every day that made me proud, caught me by surprise, made me laugh, or otherwise struck a chord. I wrote one card a week to a different



student. It was a quiet, personal goal that inspired me to really notice my students. I learned a great deal about them as people, and I realized I had been missing so much by focusing on reading behaviors and math scores instead of glimmers of their character. Not only did I get to know my students better, but the thank-you notes were more significant to them than any reward or sticker I could offer. Seeing their faces light up during morning arrival when they saw the little envelope on their desktop was an incredible feeling, and each time one of my students received a note, they walked a little taller that day.

Expressing gratitude to my students was powerful for me as a teacher, but it wasn't until I moved into leadership that I realized I needed to do the same with my colleagues. I would say the words or write the occasional email of thanks to a fellow teacher, but it was so rare that I took the same time and the precision that went into the handwritten cards. For me, the handwritten note expressed more purposeful gratitude because so much of my attention went into its development, from selecting the card at the store to crafting the message.

Gratitude is certainly a practice, one that at first I needed to schedule until I found myself automatically making a mental note of instances throughout my day. Scheduling a handwritten thank-you note may seem contrived, but it caused me to sit back from the work that can easily absorb our attention and really reflect on my day and my colleagues.

Recently, I have begun to share my practice with others in my organization. At our monthly Leadership Lunch and Learns, I bring a supply of thank-you notes, envelopes, and pens to share. I sort them on a table in the front of the room, and I announce their availability should anyone want to

send a thank-you. While voluntary, I have found it is a great way to conclude a meeting, and it encourages everyone to reflect

on someone in their lives who has made an impact. Thank-you cards can be very personal, so I make sure to have a variety of colors and styles from which they can choose.

Cultivating a culture of gratitude in an organization is important because it keeps us connected and makes us pause. Each day, we interact with a variety of colleagues and community members. Some have enormous, long-term positive impact on our professional lives, and others are part of fleeting interactions. In my experience, the organizational culture benefits from the regular expression of gratitude because it tells my colleagues that I stopped and took the time to tell them how they made me feel and how much I am thankful not just to them but for them.

My practice has come a long way since that first note to Chris. I no longer draft my message before writing it, and I am less preoccupied with my penmanship. I spend more time reflecting on why I am thankful for the recipient and how they made me feel. My goal is not to write the perfect note but to accurately express to my colleagues how they impacted me just by being their awesome, beautiful selves.

JACKIE LEVINE is the coordinator of school leadership and marketing services at PNW BOCES.

Building Communities of **Wellness, Mental Health, and Social Well-Being in Our Schools**



By Diane L.
MacDonald-MacKenzie

As I was concluding a wellness leadership initiative workshop, one of the participants, a school psychologist, made the following statement: “Thank you so much for this. I have focused on providing strategies of mindfulness, emotional mastery, and communication to my students. I forget to apply them to myself and in my relationships with my peers and colleagues. I am understanding more clearly how my wellness and mental health is imperative to my success with my students and achieving my professional goals.”

This participant had committed to a gratitude practice for the past couple of months. She noticed that this practice influenced her negativity bias and helped her to be more solution oriented in her approach. She had also been working on setting up boundaries and reducing her tendency to overcommit and overschedule. The results? Less stress, less feeling overwhelmed, and more productive conversations not only with her students but also in her relationships with her colleagues.

HEALTHY SCHOOLS REQUIRE HEALTHY LEADERSHIP. HEALTHY LEADERSHIP REQUIRES HEALTHY LEADERS.

The pressures on school administrators, staff, and teachers are enormous. Most educators I speak with feel tremendous stress daily, feel overwhelmed, and so often place their wellness, mental health, and social well-being on the back burner. How can we offer a culture of wellness and well-being to our primary charges, our students, when as leaders, we are anxious, stressed, and overwhelmed – the same qualities, the same mental health concerns we have for our students?

As leaders in our schools, we want to put forth our best efforts and be the most effective in the short term every day. When the fires start, we want to be there to put them out. We want our staff, our teachers, and our students to thrive. But the constant play to be effective in the short term is not taking into account the long-term, unsustainable toll on our health and wellness. We must permit ourselves to reprioritize the long-term influence of our personal wellness, mental health, and social well-being. We must, as leaders in our schools, look to our own health and wellness so that we lead as role models and drive cultures where mental health and social well-being are a priority for our students and our communities.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL WELLNESS

We tend to look first and foremost at our physical health, and yes, our physical health is essential. But there are many dimensions to our health, and if we ignore any of these dimen-

sions, they profoundly impact physical health. There are seven dimensions of wellness to consider.

- **Environment:** The organization and sensory impact of the spaces in which we live and work.
- **Physical:** How we exercise, hydrate, fuel our bodies nutritionally, sleep, and manage our stress.
- **Emotional:** Our emotional IQ, intrapersonal awareness, and emotional mastery.
- **Social:** Our interpersonal relationships and how we manage empathy and communication.
- **Purpose:** Our intrapersonal sense of worth, value, mission, and a sense of purpose.
- **Financial:** How we manage, budget, and save our money.
- **Focus:** Our ability, in this age of technology, to plan, focus, and produce effectively and efficiently.

FOUR STEPS FOR PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE

So, in this hectic, overwhelming world of multitasking, anxiety, and stress, how do we shift our perspective and bring more attention to our personal health and wellness? How do we go about doing the work of transformation and creating changes in our lives?

1. **Self-awareness.** Our first step to creating change is to take a self-inventory and determine where, in the multidimensions of our wellness, we have challenges we would like to tackle. Is our environmental space disorganized and slowing down our productivity? Are we getting less than seven hours of sleep, drinking enough water? Are we mastering our emotions, or are our emotions managing us? How are our relationships? Do we practice empathy? Is our financial house in



order? Do we have a vision that guides us forward?

2. Solution-oriented mindset.

It is essential when working to create changes in our lives that we practice cultivating a solution-oriented mindset. One of my favorite quotes is “If you think change is impossible, then change will be impossible.” We must move from “I can’t” to “I can.” There is always a solution. It may not be the perfect solution, but we can make a move forward in the short term. To find a solution, in many cases, there are somethings we may need to let go for change to occur. The letting go is often the hardest part!

3. Small steps create tremendous results.

So often, we set goals and make commitments that are too far out of reach. We set ourselves up for failure. For example, we are not going to the gym at all, and then we set a goal to go five days a week. How about three days a week? Maybe the gym twice a week and a 30-minute walk twice a week? Instead of making commitments that set us up for failure, set goals, and make commitments that set you up for success. One of my wellness leadership participants shared this story with me. At our first workshop, she realized that the clutter in her home and office were significantly inhibiting her productivity and increasing her stress levels. She committed

to spending ten minutes a day clearing clutter. She stuck with the plan and shared that her whole family has noticed and now pitches in, and that the family dynamics of “hectic” mornings have shifted. She plans on continuing this decluttering and daily ten minutes of organizing. She told me, “Those daily ten minutes have given me more time each day; I am more productive at work and home.”

- 4. Celebrate your successes.** We live in a world with a tremendous negativity bias. We tend to skip over achievements as we move on to the next project or thing we need to accomplish. We negate the hard work we put into our current success. From a brain-science perspective, it is essential to emphasize that “Failure creates a mindset of failure. Success creates a mindset of success.” Celebrate those small steps of success each day. Instead of ending your day with a litany of all you did not get accomplished – take a moment and write down three victories each day. Cultivate a success-oriented mindset.



21-DAY CHALLENGE: CREATE A DAILY PRACTICE

Dr. Dan Siegel, director of the Mindsight Institute, writes, “One of the key practical lessons of modern neuroscience is that, the power to direct our attention has within it the power to shape our brain’s firing patterns, as well as the power to shape the architecture of the brain itself.”

Where are you directing your attention? Is the direction of your attention supporting you to achieve your leadership goals and aspirations?

Pick one of these practices. Commit to the practice each day for 21 days. Each exercise provides a small step that supports you in directing your attention to greater wellness, mental health, and a sense of social well-being. If you miss a day, just get back on the horse. Focus on the successes. Stay self-aware over these 21 days and notice the changes and transformation. Notice how you feel each day and how you impact those around you.

- 1. Spend five minutes in mindful meditation.** You can practice by focusing on your breath, a positive statement, or one of your five senses. Or do a body scan from feet to your head. You are training your brain to manage more easily where you direct your attention. Don’t worry if your mind wanders. Just notice the wandering and come back to your area of focus.
- 2. Write or share with others three daily gratitudes each day.** Gratitude refocuses us from negativity bias to positivity and helps us to turn a challenge into an opportunity.
- 3. Set an intention each day for “who you want to be today.”** Ideas include calm, focused, empathetic listener, clear-headed, inspiring, or kind. These are character qualities you would like to cultivate. Write the intention as a positive, present-tense statement – “I am an empathetic listener,” for example. Write the intention, say it to yourself, and repeat when finding yourself in tough situations throughout the day.
- 4. Take a 20-minute walk.** Get out of the building. Do a walking meeting. Walk silently. But get outside each day for 20 minutes. Walking is a powerful tool for clearing your head, increasing energy, and instantly improving mood.
- 5. Perform an act of kindness or an act of appreciation each day.** A few benefits of kindness and appreciation include:
 - a. Increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions
 - b. Decreased migraines, chronic pain, PTSD, and depression
 - c. Activation of empathy and emotional processing
 - d. Finding that kindness and appreciation are effective in small doses and have a long-term impact.

So, let’s rewind. Healthy schools require healthy leadership. Healthy leadership requires healthy leaders. Your wellness, in all dimensions, is essential for cultivating wellness culture in your schools. Remember, “you cannot pour from an empty cup.” To lead, we must practice what we desire to teach, not only to those we lead but to the youth under our watch and care.

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Utilizing Student Feedback for Leader Reflection



By Robert Messia
and Joshua Gela

Leaders can learn valuable lessons from their most important constituency: their students. And today it is more important than ever for leaders to identify ways to ensure students are engaged in their school community, feel valued by their principals and teachers, and have their social-emotional needs met. As a result, seeking student feedback is beneficial – it offers an engagement opportunity for students and a chance for leaders to gain greater clarity by reflecting on the feedback. Creating these moments to connect with students, and moments for reflection, are critical to leader growth.

To obtain student feedback for leader reflection, thoughtful and intentional questions need to be designed in a way for students to openly and honestly respond.

What follows are several systematic ways leaders can prompt reflection throughout the school year, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data on students' school experience.

While these strategies help leaders reflect, they can also encourage a culture of reflection throughout a school building.

SIMPLE SURVEYS:

With so much technology at everyone's disposal, creating student surveys has never been easier and feedback more instantaneous.

Putting together a brief, five-question survey and asking students to complete it during morning homeroom or a specific class can be a powerful way to utilize ten minutes of the school day.

Perhaps some of the best surveys to ask students are the simplest ones as well.

Asking about student perspectives on various topics throughout the year demonstrates to students that leaders are reflective and care about their perspective. It is important for students to have this sense of value and belonging.

The results compiled provide a snapshot of student perspectives and offer concrete feedback to reflect on initiatives and goals.

Utilizing this information and sharing it with other staff members help create a culture of reflection and continuous improvement.

SCHOOL CULTURE SURVEYS:

Research shows that school culture is a driving force in student success. If a student does not feel safe and supported, no learning can occur.

Students need opportunities to provide feedback to their school leaders on their experience. And school leaders must reflect on that feedback in order to best serve their students.

Locally created surveys on this topic allow for the customization of questions and areas of focus. These questions, created by leaders in

collaboration with teachers, can have a powerful impact on school culture, as staff members are able to establish areas on which they would like to reflect.

Areas leaders can focus school culture surveys on include student connectedness, sense of belonging, school safety, bullying and harassment, LGBTQ topics, and student learning mindsets.

This information can provide a 10,000-foot view of the learning environment and school leadership, and offer general impressions of the student experience.

This school culture data, provided directly from students, allows leaders to reflect and strategically focus leadership development and school improvement programming.

FOCUS GROUPS:

It is important to recognize that while quantitative data is crucial in our profession, qualitative data is equally important and can prompt high-quality reflection for school leaders.

By engaging a randomly selected group of students from throughout the building, leaders have an opportunity to reflect and engage in dialogue about student experiences.

A student focus group protocol using a community circle approach, where approximately 12 students gather for a 20-minute meeting with the school principal, is a great way to connect with students and reflect.

This format addresses students' need to feel heard while giving school leaders valuable feedback for reflection.

Simple questions provide revealing answers and boundless ways for leaders to reflect on the achievement of their goals, particularly as they relate to social-emotional learning and student engagement.

In obtaining these authentic answers, school leaders are better able to reflect and continually improve their professional practice and ultimately maintain a focus that is driven by student needs.

MINUTE MEETINGS:

Quick, direct, and intentional surveys asking students to share a bit

about themselves and their learning can be enlightening. But blending surveys and one-on-one meetings with students can bring together the best of both worlds. A powerful way to do so is with a "minute meeting" program.

With this approach, students complete a brief survey about their school experience during quick meetings with their school counselor. Topics with this program can be wide ranging and draw on issues in the school community or building goals, and can be administered at multiple points during the school year to monitor progress.

With this survey tool, leaders can utilize the data collected, engage in discussion with teacher leaders about building and grade-level trends, reflect on goals, and empower teachers by sharing results and analyzing them together.

This reflective tool helps craft interventions for students, targeting programming elements for building relationships with those who feel disconnected, and ensuring a supportive culture for all.

Further, utilizing this process models reflection for students in answering the questions and for school staff in engaging in dialogue and discernment regarding student minute meeting responses.

REFLECTING FOR GROWTH

Reflection is necessary for growth and improvement. Today's school leaders are busier than ever and need effective, concrete, and systematic ways to ensure achievement of professional and program goals.

And while reflection in any form is important, we cannot lose sight of the need for alignment of reflection to the work of schools and leaders with their students.

Utilizing student feedback helps to meet the needs of leaders to grow in their professional practice and ultimately to better meet the needs of every student, every day.

ROBERT MESSIA is principal and JOSHUA GELA is assistant principal of Algonquin Middle School in the Averill Park Central School District in Upstate New York.

Lead by Example



By Thomas B.
Reardon, EdD

In 2012, I completed my doctorate in education leadership, culminating my studies with research into the management practices of building principals, and their effect on morale, productivity, and willingness of staff to embrace new initiatives. The infusion of the common core curriculum standards made the last component of the study (embracing initiative) quite apropos, as it was during this time staff were inundated with yet another new paradigm-shifting mandate.

The common core shift coupled with the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) evaluation process made for quite an interesting timbre in the realm of teacher morale. Recognizing this, I was curious as to what a building leader could do in order to ensure this and future initiatives would be authentically embraced, and not simply a banal act of compliance. As we know through studies of effective student management practices and the creation of classroom communities, fear of not complying does nothing more than maintain the status quo, and even that maintenance might be ambitious.

Needless to say, the results of my research were validating, but not exactly mind blowing. A solid correlation was found between principal/leader presence in classrooms, personalized communication, visibility in the hallways, and active involvement in school initiatives resulting in a higher morale, as well as a sense of personal and communal pride for their work. In turn,

such pride resulted in more of a willingness to embrace and sustain a new endeavor, academic or social. What does this mean for leaders? Quite the obvious, one might say. Get out from behind that desk. Walk around, and have conversations with staff. Personalize communication in lieu of sterile emails, and show that one truly “walks the talk.” Such a behavioral recipe, based on quantitative research, would only serve to better the product and productivity of a school community. Fast-forward seven years since publication of my dissertation and, despite another iteration of new standards via NextGen, education landscape remains the same.

When someone interviewed for a position in leadership, I am sure the aforementioned qualities were on the forefront of the answers to posed questions such as: What is your leadership style? How do you communicate? What will the school community notice about your leadership?

In turn, we know the inherent answers are obvious, and that we are to accentuate our visibility, approachability, and willingness to engage in the school community. And, we do, especially on those first days of the school year. Post-Labor Day, we arrive at school charged with adrenaline from the inspiration of our opening days, ready to greet students as they walk the sidewalks to begin a new school year. Families visit a short time after via open house programs, to which we passionately speak and welcome those groups to our school. Our smart phones provide quantifiable data to show that we are visible, as our step count is well over the daily recommendation, and our voices are usually a bit hoarse by the end of those first few weeks from all of the talking.

But the opening of school is much like the grand opening of a store: we settle into a routine. Our calendars fill with observations and meetings of all genres. The proverbial honeymoon of the fresh start begins to wane, much

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like the fresh coat of wax that has those main hallways shining the last week of August. Routine, especially for students, is not an inherently bad thing. For us, work must be accomplished, the clock begins to tick, and our list of tasks to do and bigger picture items to accomplish seems infinite. Time-consuming student behaviors surface, union issues naturally arise, and very quickly the opening days of school and the associated energy seems like it could have been a year ago, even if it's barely the conclusion of the first quarter. Our pedometers symbolically might also show that while the hours are not decreasing, our stationary time has increased. This is not to say that great things aren't possible while we aren't moving about. But when days go by without leaving the main office conference room, comments such as "Hey, stranger" or "I didn't know you still worked here" remind us that we have not been true to our initial interview promises.

As we enter the midyear, we are further reminded of what is left to be accomplished, both small and big picture. There are a few school vacations that allow one to temporarily recharge and return from winter and spring breaks prepared to take on the world. Whether it's year one or 31 as a school administrator, feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted tend to be associated with when we feel we have too little time to do so much. Recognizing this, sometimes the answer to these destructive feelings can be quite obvious, akin to the results of my doctoral research:

1. The Serenity Prayer: For those familiar with this creed, it reminds us to accept those things that we can't change (other people, external factors), and to work precisely/intelligently to change only those things we can (such as our own attitudes, perceptions, and actions). It really works, if you allow yourself to let go of those things that are outside of our control.

2. Measure That Visibility:

Thinking back to when you promised to be that leader who was in the hallways and in classrooms and who had an "open door" policy, reflect upon whether your current behavior is aligned to those answers. Perhaps it's time to take a break from those emails and visit a few rooms, even if just for a few minutes. Nothing says commitment more than visiting without a purpose, but simply because you made time.

3. Do Something Memorable Once a Day:

Think about what makes a day memorable, and it's most likely not quantified in the production of pieces of paper. Human interactions can make or break a day. Write a personalized note after a visit to a classroom, buy some coffees for your custodial crew after a particularly grueling building event, or relieve your recess aides for a few minutes so they can go inside and warm up. The fresh air is centering in and of itself.

4. Walk the Talk...All the Way:

As leaders we want to do more than simply manage the day-to-day operations, which, by nature, consume our time. We expect our faculty to make time for professional learning and growth, despite the daily demands of the classroom. If we are to understand these demands, we need to remember how easy it is to dismiss one who simply gives directives without perspective. If your staff is participating in a full-day workshop, stay with them, rather than leaving to complete other tasks. Outside of professional learning, engage in the social-emotional fabric. Contribute to those grade-level food

drives, or accept and participate in a student reading challenge. Engagement models best practice, but it's difficult to engage in said activities without feeling a sense of excitement in the work.

In the blink of an eye, we will be concluding a school year, and will most likely start planning for the 2020-2021 school year in the very near future, if not already. Accept that we can't change time (or lack thereof), but we can choose to live in the moment, regardless if that moment is in the dead of winter while preparing for midyear assessments. Continue to be the leader you promised to be on that first interview, as being true to yourself is one of the most cathartic, energetic aspects of this life we call school administration. You, your staff, and students deserve nothing short.

THOMAS B. REARDON, EdD, is the superintendent of schools in the Wynantskill Union Free School District.

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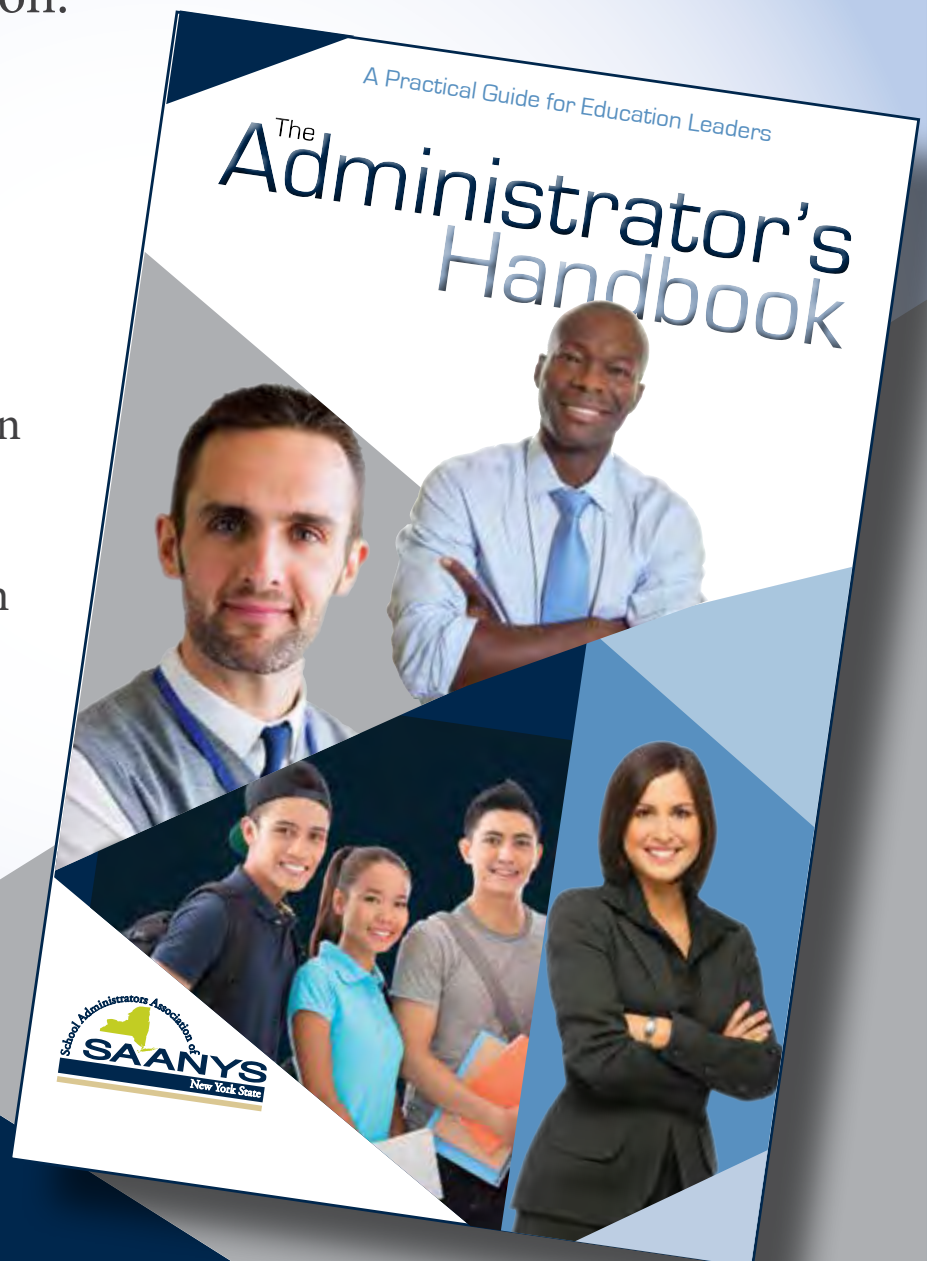
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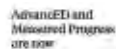
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Contact

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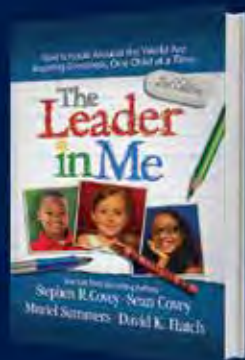
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