

When School Leaders Live in the Middle

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School leaders are faced with stress as part of their daily jobs; however, left unaddressed, stress has the potential of becoming mentally and physically exhausting. School leaders need opportunities for stress reduction as well as the means to predict and anticipate stress in an effort to minimize its effects. This commentary discusses leadership-related stress and offers strategies to minimize and cope with stress.

School leaders are so frequently immersed in stressful situations that the potential exists for mental and physical exhaustion. The personal and professional effects of stress may become a matter of life and death if left untended (Burgett, 2001). Lupien (2010) notes that as the brain detects stress (i.e., good and bad), it responds with varying degrees of a *fight or flight* response. Principals are not afforded with these primal outlets for stress reduction throughout the professional day (e.g., fight, yell, run away) and must find ways to minimize damaging emotional responses by *predicting* and *anticipating* stressors.

Many principals protect themselves from this barrage of daily stress, in part, by simply anticipating bad days. Like Boy Scouts bringing a snake-bite kit on a camping trip, school leaders may bring their teacher-bite kit or parent-bite kit to school. These kits are mental exits they keep in reserve when they forecast heavy emotions fraught with stress during work. While this strategy may mitigate bad stressors, it also unfortunately suppresses positive stressors, thus creating a scenario in which principals *live in the middle* existing in a state between bad and good emotions, and associated stress responses. School leaders who live in the middle arrive at work with a mindset that prepares them for the worst.

Expecting the worst prevents both bad and exceptionally great days from blindsiding principals; it affords a degree of control, and prevents them from being emotionally vulnerable to the next tragedy or surprise. Persistent highs and lows can lead to chronic stress and take a severe toll on overall health (Cohen & Willis, 1985). Simply stated, living in the middle is one strategy to mitigate chronic stress. Drago-Severson (2012) wisely suggests that given the challenging complexity of the modern principalship[there is an] urgency of supporting principals stress-relief and renewal (p. 53).

Kyriacou (2011) notes that stress evokes the experience of unpleasant negative emotions when he speaks of educators in general. Principals can experience problems when we do not allow stressful events, and their associated emotions, to influence our day because we also minimize the possibility of favorable events to contribute positive emotions. We simply cannot select which emotions to ignore without the risk of becoming emotionless. We either choose to be open to all emotions, or none at all. School leaders often develop thick skin over time which provides a mental armor that allows anything to happen without succumbing to debilitating emotional reactions. It is a way of self-inducing both an antidepressant and an anti-stimulant, often manifested as a leader being known to have a cool head.

From this discussion, school leaders must ask themselves: Given my capacity to shut down emotional extremes and develop a thick skin to negate stress, what are the potential costs to my effectiveness as a leader? Thick skin has the potential to compromise several cornerstones of leadership:

Ability to empathize: Strong leaders should be able to understand life's difficult issues through awareness of situational context and when teachers are experiencing problems in their personal or professional lives. School leaders need to work constructively when teachers suffer from diminished capacity.

Willingness to collaborate: The best professional development usually comes from peers who found effective strategies to cope with similarly difficult students and comparably challenging situations. A collaborative school culture best fosters this transfer of craft wisdom. If school leaders have been unnecessarily toughened by their experiences, they may be less likely to support teacher interdependency.

Capacity to facilitate an organizational vision and mission with passion: Motivational visions are shared with passion and excitement, and create an inspirational movie of the mind. School leaders with thick skin may not successfully articulate the future with compelling passion if their emotional reserves have been depleted.

Willingness to admit mistakes and tolerate differing mindsets: School leaders make many decisions each day, and some may not be optimal choices given the competing nature of decision-making. Some stakeholders will wait for the principal to make difficult decisions, and hope to discredit all of their decisions based on one miscue. Tolerating these mindsets is essential. There also may be times when the leader is simply wrong, and he or she needs to be able to respond with something more useful than denial or apathy.

School leadership will always involve stress. Therefore, stress must be acknowledged and understood if its effects are to be reduced and minimized. Although they focus on teachers, school leaders may benefit from Richards suggestions for coping with stress (2012):

Make time for yourself;

Make time for exercise;

Get enough sleep and eat a healthy diet;

Make time for family and friends as a support system;

Practice meditation and solitude;

Indulge your sense of humor and include some fun in your teaching every day; and

Commit to displaying a positive attitude and let things go that are out of your control. (pp. 308312)

What would Richards coping suggestions (2012) look like in the busy life of a principal? Consider these representative suggestions and keep in mind that there are neither simple nor universal solutions:

Time for yourself: Find one hour each day for yourself whether it is pursuing a hobby, reading for enjoyment, or contemplating quietly. Categorize this period on your electronic calendar as action research.

Exercise: Commit to cardiovascular exercise and strength training for a minimum of 30 minutes each day. Set a daily goal of 10,000 steps if you are able to walk.

Sleep and healthy diet: Everyone requires a different amount of uninterrupted sleep, but generally it is between five-and-a-half to eight hours per day. You simply cannot catch up with a once-per-week sleep-in day. A healthy diet includes a daily variety of fresh foods, and should be limited to no more than one fast-food meal per week.

Time for family and friends: School leaders expend a great amount of energy per day while working on their demanding jobs. Spending time with friends and family is a means of taking essential energy back.

Meditate: Strong leaders are always reflective leaders, using prior knowledge, past experiences, and sufficient time to provide informed leadership. Personal reflection makes a big difference on professional performance, even if it is only 15 minutes per day. However, reflecting while distracted with things like driving will not accomplish much, usually resulting in nothing more than task-oriented thinking, not deeper thought. Budget time on your calendar for meditation and reflection.

Use humor and have fun each day: Decades of research have concluded that laughter, over time, offers significant medical benefits, including boosting the immune system, lowering blood pressure, improving heart and respiratory functions, even regulating blood sugar (Borchard, 2011, p. 1). Give in to the power of laughter and not only benefit your health, but model for others that you do not take yourself too seriously.

Display a positive attitude and let go of things out of your control: Mental attitudes affect everything you think about (Sasson, n.d.). Letting go of things beyond your control frees your mind and makes it easier for information, intuition, ideas, inspiration, and motivation (Sasson, n.d., para. 9) to flow and be taken advantage of. A few easy steps can help develop a positive attitude. Harness (2006) suggests:

Be passionate about life and approach each day with vigor.

Act, not react, to stressors. Being proactive makes good things happen.

Accept that good can come from everything; even when bad things happen.

Appreciate and be grateful for what you have. Let go of any needy mindsets.

Seize and take advantage of new opportunities with a no-regrets attitude.

Truly believe that only you are in charge of your destiny.

Know what to throw away. We discard things all the time like mail and e-mail (e.g., it takes about 12 seconds per item to know if it needs to be trashed or not). School administrators likely receive about 50100 emails per day and half of them could be deleted within 30 seconds. Why not apply this efficiency to your whole world?

Living in the middle is safe but it can potentially compromise a leader's ability to provide effective leadership for complex educational organizations like schools. Living with both good and bad stress while utilizing effective coping strategies enables school leaders to enjoy the full array of emotions that define, distinguish, and enable high-quality leadership capacity. Far too many school administrators are not willing to consider their own personal and professional needs first. These essential needs are persistently placed second behind those of students, faculty, staff, parents, district administrators, and a host of other school stakeholders. Coping with stress is vital for school leaders to persist effectively in the educational profession.

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