

Framing Leadership through Continuous Learning

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If one were to glance over the philosophy statements of most teachers' resumes, you would find "the ability to instill a love of lifelong learning" prominently featured in many goals of education. Of course, these teachers are never referring to themselves. Despite the espoused missions of teachers - and the principal leaders who once occupied the classroom - very few see this as a personal goal. We live in a world that prizes knowledge, yet ironically brushes aside any organized learning after the age of 30. This puzzling norm eventually leads to stagnant organizations with lackluster results. A successful leader knows better.

A quick glance at the most successful multinational companies show leaders that have embraced continuous learning as part of their strategic plans to stay ahead in their industry and bring about results. It is this constant yearning for new information, of wanting to improve even when results have been achieved, and the ability to inspire it within numerous employees, that has led Costa and Kallick to designate "remaining open to continuous learning" as one of the 13 habits of mind successful people employ (2000).

As the second half of my principal internship continues onward, I have noticed an increasing need to keep this habit in the forefront of my mind. It is a habit that I must possess, and, at the same time, must also inspire in those that I will lead. In a profession where monetary motivations for improving one's practice are scant, and job status increasingly secure, the danger of remaining stagnant in one's own learning and creating a culture of complacency within the school is very real and all too easy.

The matter becomes more complicated when we realize that the ability to continuously learn implies constant change. Humans tend to behave in homeostatic ways. Evans states that it is against our nature to embrace change; anyone who states otherwise is most likely embracing

change initiated by them (personal communication, January 12, 2014). And yet, as an aspiring principal, I will constantly be called to not only initiate change in my building, but initiate transformations in my staff. Reshaping curriculum, teaching pedagogy, and technology all require an individual that welcomes learning new ideas, coupled with the unwelcome acceptance of change.

This requirement has been further realized for me through one of the assigned projects this semester. In my teacher development inquiry project, I am tasked with improving the practice of one of my colleagues. In order for his practice to change, he must be open to continually learning new methods despite his apparent success in the classroom. The project is difficult because the teacher is already competent. As written in an earlier journal, the challenge of forcing a competent teacher to examine their own practice in order to make improvements can be more difficult than giving advice to a struggling teacher (Journal 5, February 19, 2014).

Creating this change in my staff member requires a conscious practice of two critical parts of leadership as defined by Fullan (2001): relationship building and knowledge sharing. Achieving success in these parts requires a simultaneous exemplification and embodiment of continual learning.

Fullan believes that relationships formed around a moral purpose are necessary in today's leaders (2001). The days of authoritative leadership models are gone. An organization that does not cultivate and nourish collaborative relationships in the workplace will naturally fail. When I first approached my staff member about changes to his pedagogy, I was initially met with some skepticism because I had not yet taken time to build the relationship needed to gain his trust.

Although I thought the trust was already implicit, a leader's ability to change another's practice is predicated upon *mutual* belief in the strength of a relationship.

No book can accurately describe how to create a relationship. It requires a certain genuine interest in another person that is hard to describe. In fact, Evans touches upon the natural ability of some leaders to foster relationships through a certain type of charisma that is innate and almost unteachable (1996). Creating and fostering a work relationship between a principal and teacher is most assuredly a difficult task; however one who is authentic and explicit in their organizational and personal goals will find it more manageable.

Evans speaks of authenticity as quite possibly the most important aspect a leader must possess in order to gain the needed trust that propels teachers to any sort of mobilizing action in a school. He also believes that change is predicated on the ability to rally around commonly shared goals by a leader and staff (1996). My ability to be authentic when approaching my colleague was key in building a relationship of trust and respect. It was also important for our mutual beliefs. I built the need for change around the idea that we both hold the importance of art education in high regard, and want to ensure that we are providing students opportunities to gain knowledge about themselves and the world through art. This is the type of authentic relationship building that hopefully leads to teachers opening their minds to further learning through transforming their practices.

Naturally, what is most important is not the acceptance of change, but the manifest actions attributed to it. Dr. Dawson, in her lectures on motivating staff, notes that when leaders petition for transformation in a teacher, it is important that they never ask of something that he or she would not do themselves (personal communication, January 11, 2014). To do so would be

inauthentic. When leaders are asking their staff to be open to continuous learning in their practices, they too must embody that principle, learning new ways of leadership and improved methods and practices. Leaders must not be worried about small failures, the natural result of trying something new, in search of the larger goals.

Practicing this habit of mind meant that I had to venture into the change process with my teacher. Fullan believes that school environments have historically done an awful job at sharing knowledge among one another (2001). Evans speaks of teachers as idiosyncratic in nature who prefer to learn in isolation (1996). However, a good leader will combat this natural inclination in the teacher profession. Costa and Kallick (2000) propose that leaders, "...must never be too proud to learn, to admit faults, or say they don't know" (p. 37). Successful principals should be an exemplar of this practice, never being too proud to admit a lack of knowledge. I believe teachers who see this humility will naturally feel more comfortable in both asking and sharing knowledge. Entering into the teacher improvement project, I made a point to never imply that I definitively knew the right way of improving my teacher's practice. In fact, neither of us do. However, fostering a trusting relationship that shares knowledge is the first step to discovery.

Competent leaders embody another habit of mind closely related to being open to learning: the ability to take risks. While the ability to take risks and venture out on the cusp of chaos might appear unsound advice to educators whose sole job is the betterment of children, the thought can be reframed. Carol Dweck writes about people's ability to embrace learning in one of two ways: a fixed mindset vs. a growth mindset (2006). The former deals with people who believe that intelligence is fixed and our ability to expand our knowledge and talents are rather limited to predetermined bounds. The latter deals with those people who believe that intelligence

is an ever-increasing process and our abilities are dependent on our motivation and willingness to grow outside of our bounds.

Embodying a growth mindset is essential in an aspiring leader. Back in January, during an informal mid-year review, my principal Ms. Jones-Tate pushed my understanding of leadership as it relates to the job at Hillcrest Elementary. She gently showed me how my practices needed to incorporate more social activities. At the time, I wrote that I could have objected to her view of my responsibilities, but I took the words as guidance and advice that would help me grow to be a better leader (Journal 3, February 3, 2014).

Equally important is the ability to foster a growth mindset in our staff. Having a growth mindset was key to my interactions with my art teacher. He had to see me willing to learn more from him, eager to understand his own beliefs about art instruction and pedagogy, before he could allow himself the ability to attempt change. The growth mindset is so crucial to continuous learning that the two concepts almost seem like synonyms.

As I continue my internship experience, I am reminded everyday of my inexperience as a principal. However, I am also confident and encouraged by my habitual quest for new learning and the many people at my school internship experience that have been willing to share knowledge with me (Journal 2, January 27, 2014). Every day is an opportunity to keep a growth mindset toward my profession and my life. It's an opportunity to succeed by failing. It is also an opportunity to teach and lead others in this same growing way. Whether we are leaders of a school or a multinational corporation, leaders are called upon to lead in a culture of change by example. The best way I can do this is by making the habit of continuous learning a principle of my life and leadership.

References

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