

Leadership Self-Care

Tips for surviving distance leading and learning

Gina Yonts

Associate Director, AWSP

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Improving Instruction, Managing Resources,
Engaging Families and Communities*

Life as a school leader in a building with staff and students is one thing; trying to lead from a distance and not face-to-face is another. With COVID-19, school closures, and “stay home, stay healthy” decrees, school leaders are once again facing challenges with unimaginable stress and leadership tests that even the best principal preparation programs could not have prepared us for.

As the school closures progressed from temporary to permanent for the 2019-20 school year, students, staff and leadership alike are making changes to their day-to-day existence in public education. Managing stress and work life balance is more important now than ever as the cocoon of your home environment becomes the Principal’s Office.

LEARNING HAPPENS IN RELATIONSHIPS

Humans are social. Lock everyone down in their houses for three weeks and watch people struggle. Tasks as simple as walking to the mailbox, a quick grocery store run, or the daily office banter have turned into major productions and as a whole we may not have been prepared for what this will all look like in the coming months. As a human race, we are missing these seemingly benign interactions. Our brains are constantly seeking connection —

“Humans are social. Lock everyone down in their houses for three weeks and watch people struggle.”

it is how we are hard-wired. Your leadership matters!

How are leaders modeling relationships for their staff and families? What amazing ideas have you come up with out of pure happenstance and “Leadership Heart Work?” How are you encouraging your staff and families to create connection and re-connection with their students and children? What are YOU doing to prioritize relationships in your new work environment?

Family walks, board games, closet cleaning, yardwork, cooking meals together, gardening, story-telling of family history and back-to-basics family engagement within the home setting are examples we should not overlook as we model and encourage our stakeholders to capitalize on the gift of time we’ve been given due to the COVID-19 situation.

CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

For our family, the first week of “stay home, stay healthy” orders came on the heels of a family snowboarding trip. We went from empty-nesters to

having three adult children at home as they were navigating uncertain work situations, closures, and travel home. Crisis planning ensued and stress was high. However, using this time to have the millennials call and coach grandparents through installing Zoom apps on tablets and practicing launching and answering calls was a beautiful bridging of the generations. Family text chains and weekly calls to stay connected was the result of stabilizing uncertainty for our family, young and old alike. The school family needs the same level of connection to be successful during stressful times and looking within your team to identify the helpers can bring your school family together as well.

The OSPI COVID-19 Continuous Learning document calls out very clearly the importance of taking Maslow’s Hierarchy to heart as we proceed into these final few months of distance learning in our schools. How are you modeling and leading intentionally around the theme of connection for your staff? Your personal family and friendships? Are you intentionally reaching out to those who may have a limited circle of connection? The culture of your school can be supported through strategic thinking and planning for connection. Urging teachers to intentionally pursue their colleagues, their students/families could be an opportunity to support your virtual school culture when face to face opportunities are limited.



“ Connection over content is the mantra we are using in our home as we navigate sharing workspace, the daily sprawl of work on every open counter space, multiple Zoom calls as well as new and different work expectations.”

GIVE YOURSELF GRACE

School leaders who find themselves working and leading from home are adding a new layer to leadership and work/life balance. Be gentle with yourself and give yourself the grace you so willingly give to others. Connection over content is the mantra we are using in our home as we navigate sharing workspace, the daily sprawl of work on every open counter space, multiple Zoom calls as well as new and different work expectations. Productivity and efficiency are different in these new working conditions and simple tasks can produce frustration and anxiety as we discover new work-arounds. This isn't the time to add the pressure to yourself to work just as hard and be just as productive as you would normally be if your work life hadn't been upended. It will take time, patience and a little perseverance to get used to the "new normal."

Are you designating workday boundaries for yourself? How are

you coaching your teachers and families to establish and maintain healthy boundaries around work/life balance? Are you modeling and sharing strategies around your own struggle and being vulnerable and open to share your experiences with your teams? You are the leader, but there are many other descriptors you all carry — don't be afraid to be your FULL self with your people. Building and maintaining trust with your stakeholders through sharing our own struggles offers a rare glimpse into leadership, and models giving grace to ourselves.

OPTIMISM IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

The School Leader Paradigm is an excellent resource to draw on as our soft skills of leadership are being pushed and pulled. The personal intelligence that I have looked into much this past month is *optimism*. Optimism is the quality school leaders possess to remain steadfast personally and professionally in

the face of adversity — believing adversity can be overcome and looking on the positive side of challenging situations. Students, staff and families look to the leader to be the beacon of hope and encouragement in uncertain times.

What have you been doing to maintain or even bolster your optimism? Have you plugged into a new podcast or subscribed to a blog that has been particularly helpful? Listed below are a few of my favorites that you might be interested in checking out:

- “Unlocking Us” podcast, by Brene Brown
- “The Empowered Principal” podcast, by Angela Robeck Kelly
- “The Happiness Lab” podcast with Dr. Lori Santos
- “Emotional Agility” TED Talk by Susan David

Finding ways to acknowledge our circumstances and get ready for a new normal takes time. At AWSP we are here to support you during this time. Please read “Principal Matters” and consider joining your grade-level associate directors for office hours as well. Knowing you're not alone is one of the most helpful things you can do for yourself as we weather the COVID-19 storm together. ■