

Lessons for New Leaders

Categories: Uncategorized

This is about the time of year in school systems when folks begin to apply for leadership roles for the next year. Most of these leaders come from the teaching ranks, and while they know a lot about what happens, or should happen, in the classroom, they haven't had the opportunity to know what it feels like to be where the "buck stops" and all that that implies.

I filled a number of leadership roles over the course of my career, from assistant principal, to principal, to central office director, to assistant superintendent and then superintendent in three different districts; and then I spent 14 years as the director of a national membership organization for superintendents, so you might say I have "been there, done that." While each of these jobs was different, there were a lot of similarities. Perhaps one of the greatest similarities was the first few months on the job and the challenges that time provided. When you are new to a position, you are faced with the need to learn the culture, figure out the few players, and make your plan for leading. I learned a lot over the years, and most of what I learned can't be found in textbooks on educational leadership. What I would like to do is share some of the lessons I learned the hard way in hopes that can smooth your path as you consider moving into a new leadership role or as you are trying to make sense of the one that you currently play.

Lesson One: *Prepare To Be Resisted.* Now that you are the leader you may think your arrival will be greeted with palm fronds and shouts of "hosanna." What you are about to discover is that Palm Sunday is quickly followed by Good Friday, so prepare for the crucifixion. Of course, in most cases this is symbolic and not real-but you will quickly find that you and all those great ideas you have will not be embraced and celebrated, at least not initially. Remember, like a new germ entering the body, all the antibodies will come out to greet you and render you harmless. This isn't because people are mean or that they see you as a bad person, it is just because that is the way human nature operates. Change is threatening and people don't like it. Even if you are becoming leader of a school or system where you have worked and where you have friends, when you become the "boss," those relationships change dramatically. It is just the way it is. Don't take it personally. This leads to lesson two.

Lesson Two: *Be Judicious in your Change Efforts.* A good rule of thumb here is to cut in half what you are told you need to do by the "powers that be," whether it is the school board or the superintendent. They tend to exaggerate what they really want. I had a friend who was summarily fired by his school board. He had gotten rid of virtually the entire central office because the board asked him to clean house. When he did, they fired him. I explained to him that they didn't want everyone fired, just the ones they didn't like. In my first principalship I introduced a lot of change rapidly. I ran into all sorts of problems. I found out that, while the superintendent wanted me to make changes, he didn't want the blowback I was creating. You will also come in with lots of great ideas that you want to accomplish. The problem is that people can only handle so much change at one time. If you overdo it, you will short out the system and increase the resistance that you will inevitably encounter.

Lesson Three: *Drive with Caution.* Being a new leader is very much like being a new driver. Remember when you first learned to drive and how overwhelming it all seemed? You had a thousand things to think about-traffic, road signs, pedestrians, how the car was running, etc. Then when you had to make a turn it got really scary. I often either oversteered and hit the curb, or understeered and

faced the oncoming lane. Thankfully I learned and now driving is so second nature that I have to remember to stay present so I pay attention. New leaders haven't yet gotten to the point where leading is second nature to them. Until that happens, be aware of the turns you are making.

Lesson Four: *Use All Your Gears.* Continuing the driving metaphor, it is important to remember that you have several gears in your car. Use them. I have seen so many leaders who think the only gear they have is drive. This is dangerous. When you are confronted with a serious obstacle, the solution to that obstacle is not to hit the gas and drive faster. If it is a minor impediment, that might work. However, if you are facing a brick wall, sometimes the judicious course is to put yourself in neutral, survey the issues facing you and determine if the wall is paper or brick. You can drive through a paper wall. For a brick wall the best course is to put the car in reverse, back up, and then go around the wall. Once you have mastered all your gears you can lead more effectively.

Next month I will continue the lessons for new leaders in the hope they will be useful to you. (You can now read [it here.](#))