

Leadership Is Like Boogie Boarding

Sunny, cloudless skies are overhead. Multicolored umbrellas, chairs, and blankets dot the beach. The waves are rolling in and breaking in perfect sets. I look up from writing my reflections on school leadership and watch the boogie boarders paddling out, trying to catch the perfect wave at the perfect point for the perfect ride. As I watch them and notice their timing, sense of adventure, and willingness to take a risk, it occurs to me that leadership is a lot like boogie boarding—and that I enjoy being a leader as much as I enjoy boogie boarding.

I have learned several parallel lessons about boogie boarding and leadership during the past eight years: getting to know your environment; learning to read the waves; watching out for rip currents; knowing when to get out of the water to rest, relax, and reflect; and mastering the “stingray shuffle.”

Lesson 1. Get to Know Your Environment

Years ago, I thought that all beaches were created equal. As far as I was concerned, if the ocean looked beautiful and the sun caught the waves just right, any beach was a perfect place to be. All of that changed when I took up boogie boarding.

Similarly, early in my career as an educator I thought that all schools were created equal. It didn't matter much to me if they were large or small, rural or suburban. I took only casual notice of factors that impacted the school climate, like disenfranchised or entrenched staff members, competing special interest groups, or the staff's personal and professional interactions with one another, parents, and the community. My perception of the school environment changed when I became a principal.

Now I realize that, just as each beach has its unique characteristics, each school community has its unique culture, and we need to notice and consider the little nuances and subtleties that are part of it.

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Lesson 2. Learn to Read the Waves

When I began boogie boarding, I was content to catch the little waves that broke close to shore. They were safe and predictable. The more experienced I became, the more comfortable I was going deeper and catching waves farther out. I also became more selective. If I wanted a little more excitement, I would choose higher, more turbulent waves. If I was a long way out and wanted a relaxing ride in, I would look for smaller waves that broke in pairs. I learned to predict the risks and results of my wave selection.

On a recent trip to the beach with family members, two of the kids were out catching some waves with their boogie boards when we noted that they were drifting a considerable distance from us. I volunteered to flag them down, as I truly understood that they were both caught up in the moment and oblivious to their position in the water. They weren't in any danger, so I

drifted along the shore with them until I got their attention. If they had been in danger, I would have employed a more direct intervention.

In reflecting on this incident, I couldn't help but think of how often as a leader I, too, had lost sight of where I was headed because something more exciting or more interesting came along. I also wondered what role I could play to help colleagues who might be similarly drifting.

As leaders, we have many opportunities to decide which strategy we are going to employ to get either our colleagues or ourselves back on course. We have many opportunities to read the waves, determine the danger, and decide the best course of action.

Being an experienced reader of the waves makes all the difference when it comes to pleasurable rides and a sense of accomplishment, both as a boogie boarder and school leader. Look for those good-sized waves that keep you moving forward and out of the turbulence. But remember that big waves are fully capable of crashing you face-first into the sand. Neither your leadership nor boogie boarding careers will last too long if you plan on a steady diet of chasing the big ones. So, be selective and know the risks and rewards before you start paddling to catch a wave, be it a new initiative, implementation of a specific teaching strategy, or schoolwide cultural reform.

Lesson 3. Watch Out for the Rip Currents

Rip currents are a phenomenon of nature, caused by the convergence of opposing forces, which pull swimmers and boogie boarders away from shore. There are a few important things to remember if you get caught in a rip current. First and foremost, do not panic and fight the current in attempting to get to shore; the force and direction of the rip current will only wear you out. Instead, swim parallel to the shore until you are out of the rip current, then safely make your way to shore.

Boogie boarders are generally fortunate enough to be at beaches that

warn them of rip currents, and there are lifeguards to keep swimmers from harm's way. School leaders, however, are not always so lucky. There are many times when we are enjoying the ride, selecting perfect waves and getting others to join us in implementing a new program or initiating a new policy. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, we are caught in a major rip current and find ourselves swimming against the tide with apparently no escape and no rescuer handy.

For example, about three months into opening a new school that embraced some innovative practices, I experienced a major rip current. The teachers and I had assumed that most of our parents had adapted to the changes, so I was totally surprised when a parent brought to my attention that a small group of parents, who had not shared their concerns with me, believed that we were being unresponsive and not listening to them.

In situations like this, we must resist the temptation to panic and fight back.

Instead, we must take a lesson from the boogie boarders and move parallel to the others on the shore—such as staff members, parents, district office personnel, and other principals—until we get out of the turbulence and can reassess the situation. In my case, my staff, district office personnel, and I worked closely with the parents to provide opportunities—such as coffee chats, informational meetings, a home-school survey, open forums, and expanded coverage of curricular items in our newsletter—to address their issues and exit the turbulence.

Lesson 4. Get Out of the Water to Rest, Relax, and Reflect

Even on the best of days at the beach, it is important to take a break and get out of the water. When I began boogie boarding, I wanted to spend all of my time in the water. I figured that this would help me to better understand the various types of waves and figure out how to successfully select and ride them. Now I realize that

much of my improvement in boogie boarding is a direct result of watching the waves from the comfort of my beach chair.

By the same token, when I was gaining leadership skills, I didn't appreciate the role that reflection plays in our hectic, fast-paced world. Now I realize that we take a new perspective when we look back on where we have been and reflect forward to see where we are going. We also get a wider, longer view of the waves when we are stationary on shore, and we realize how far out we are comfortable going and the type of waves we prefer.

Lesson 5. Master the "Stingray Shuffle"

During certain times of the year, the stingrays love to hang out in the warm, shallow water close to shore. Stingrays are not predators, just flat fish with terrible eyesight. When we surprise them, they protect themselves by stinging. The "stingray shuffle" is merely a way of announcing our presence by shuffling our feet slowly through the water, rather than running or taking big steps.

As leaders, it is our responsibility to give our colleagues similar warnings so as not to put them in a self-protection mode. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways: by explaining the reasons behind a change; listening to and addressing concerns; constantly articulating your vision; and outlining timelines and expectations.

Yes, I have learned several life lessons from boogie boarding and leadership during the past eight years; I truly enjoy both activities and drawing the parallels between them. It is reassuring to be at the beach and see perfect waves rolling in for boogie boarders. It also is reassuring to look up from my reflections and know that boogie boarding will have a positive impact on my leadership—if I just take the time to catch a few waves. ■

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