

Motorcycling and the Principalship

After a long career as an elementary principal, I entered the world of retirement a few years ago and fulfilled a lifetime dream. I learned to ride a motorcycle!

In my current role as a college professor teaching aspiring teachers, counselors, and administrators, I began to reflect on some of the similarities between motorcycling and being a principal.

Before I take my gorgeous blue Yamaha 650 out for a ride, I check the oil level and tire pressure, make sure I have enough gas, and don my protective gear—leather jacket and gloves, heavy boots, and face-shielding helmet.

Just as there is nothing riskier than riding without a carefully maintained bike or the gear needed to keep me comfortable and safe, a principal should be similarly prepared. Whether it is planning for a new year or for a parent conference, it is critical to carefully examine all aspects of the task.

There were times in my career as a principal when I wished for protective gear when dealing with irate parents, negative publicity in the local paper, misbehaving students, or unhappy faculty and staff. As a principal, you need a soft heart, tough skin, and the ability to look at an issue as a problem

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to be solved, and not as an attack on your professionalism.

While I like riding on my own, I really enjoy riding with a group that includes a wide variety of people—a university president, a judge, a microbiologist, a casino worker, an architect, and an ophthalmologist, to name just a few. We ride each week with the designated leader choosing the route and the rest of us following until we stop for an early-morning breakfast.

The group welcomed me as a rookie rider and taught me the unwritten rules of the road. For example, there are times when you ride in a staggered formation and times when it is better to ride single file. When riding in a group, you always make sure the

rider behind you knows where to turn. If you get too far ahead, you slow down and wait for the others to catch up. When you pass other motorcyclists, you greet them by holding your left arm down, palm open.

As a principal, I found great value in belonging to a collegial group because the group’s collective wisdom far surpassed anything I knew or could do on my own. I met with my district colleagues once a month for lunch, where we shared concerns and were able to brainstorm and process issues in a social setting. Another source of group support came from my membership in local, state, and national principals’ associations. It was at local meetings and at state and national conferences that I learned the unwritten rules of the road for principals.

One of the rules I learned during my first group motorcycle ride was the “road kill rule.” When riding a motorcycle, if you see something in the road ahead—a dead possum, for example—you stick out your leg and point so that the rider behind you is aware of the potential danger.

As a principal, each day brings obstacles similar to road kill. Almost every day, you face the unexpected and must be able to adjust quickly and make good decisions. There are times, though, when we just don’t see a problem developing and are blindsided by someone’s unexpected reaction to a decision. It is at times like these that a colleague’s insight and wisdom can help you. If you know you are heading into a situation that may be problematic, take the time to talk with colleagues. They can be invaluable by allowing you to examine the situation from a different perspective.

One of my most exciting experiences as a motorcyclist was the day a fellow biker presented me with my very own ride bell. Among bikers, there is a legend that a tiny silver bell attached to your motorcycle will protect you from the “road gremlins”—a dead battery, a pothole, or any number of other troubles. You can buy your own bell, but the magic is



supposed to be doubled when you receive a bell from a fellow rider.

As principals, we sometimes find ourselves feeling isolated and alone when hard decisions must be made. Even though we may have the support of an excellent faculty and staff, there are times when the circumstances call for confidentiality and there is no one immediately available with whom to discuss the situation. At times like this, I appreciated being able to call a fellow principal with whom I could share the difficulties I was facing. Knowing I had a colleague I could trust meant the world to me. As principals, we can provide a “ride bell” of protection for others by being there and supporting them during challenging times.

According to an old saying, “There are two kinds of motorcyclists—those who have dropped their bikes and those who are going to drop their bikes.” I managed to drop my


bike two weeks after I started riding. I remember with great clarity approaching a stop sign in my neighborhood, thinking “good stop, smooth braking, good downshifting.” And with that, I simply fell over. One minute I was upright, the next minute on my side. I couldn’t move my right leg and thought I had broken it. After a trip to the emergency room, an overnight stay, and two weeks on crutches, the damaged nerve healed and I began to ride again. Every time I rode, I was scared and I stayed scared for weeks after that. The important lesson here is that I got back on that blue bike and I rode. I learned from the experience and am now a better and more careful rider because of it.

As principals, we make mistakes. We get ourselves in situations for which there seems to be no way out. But we have to believe that there is a way out, and it usually means being honest, admitting our mistakes, and learning from them. Even the angriest parent or faculty member can accept “I’m sorry.

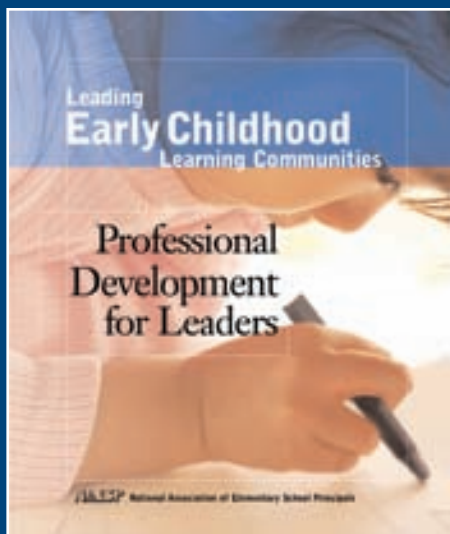
I didn’t handle that well. I want to work this out.”

Being a principal isn’t easy. In fact, there are times when the demands of the job can take away the joy that comes with making a positive difference in the lives of children, their families, and the staff and faculty at your school. It is critical that we don’t allow that to happen. We must hold on to the joy, remembering each day why we do what we do.

So, apply this advice from motorcycling: Be prepared for all tasks; protect yourself in difficult situations; seek out your colleagues for wisdom; watch out for the unexpected; support your fellow principals; and learn from your mistakes.

Happy riding! 

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